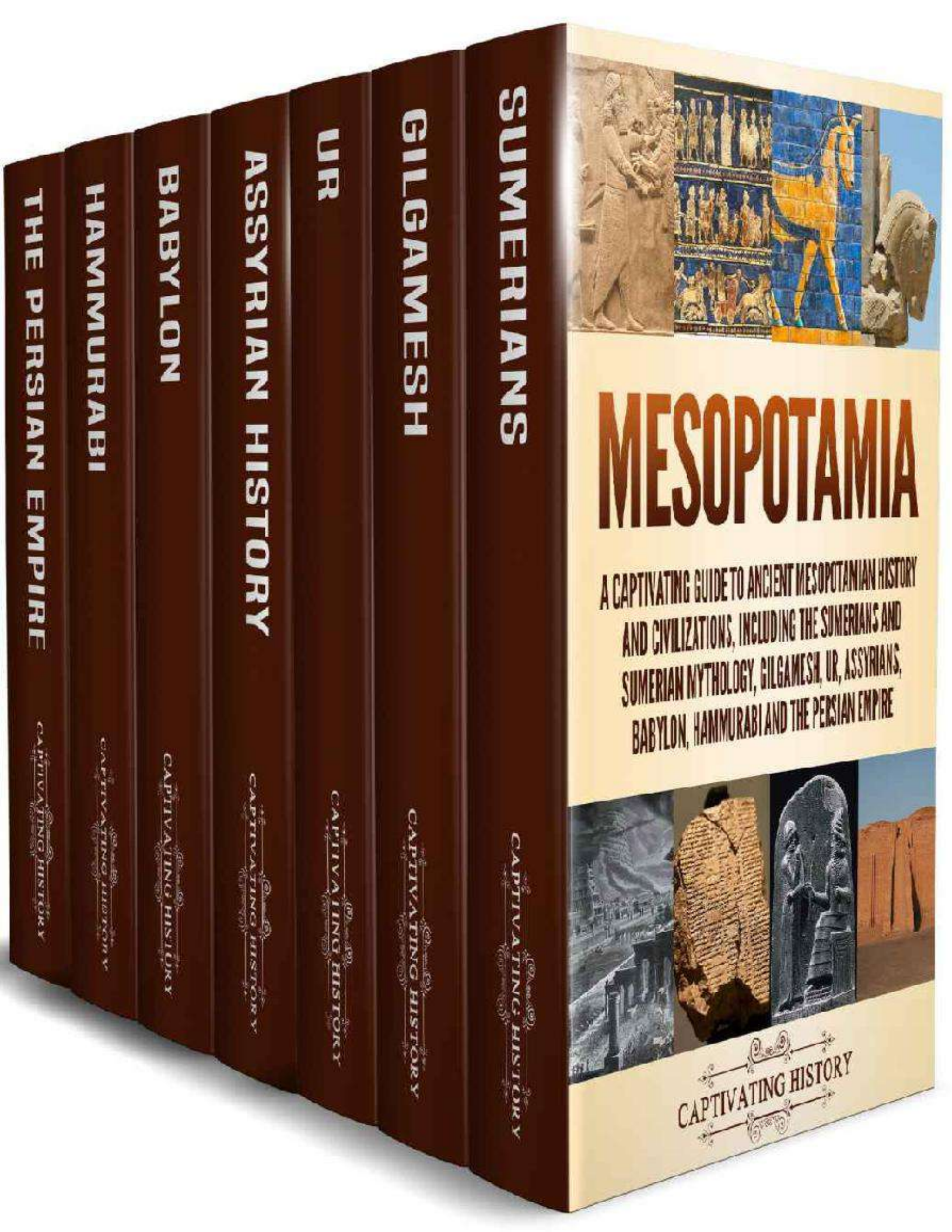
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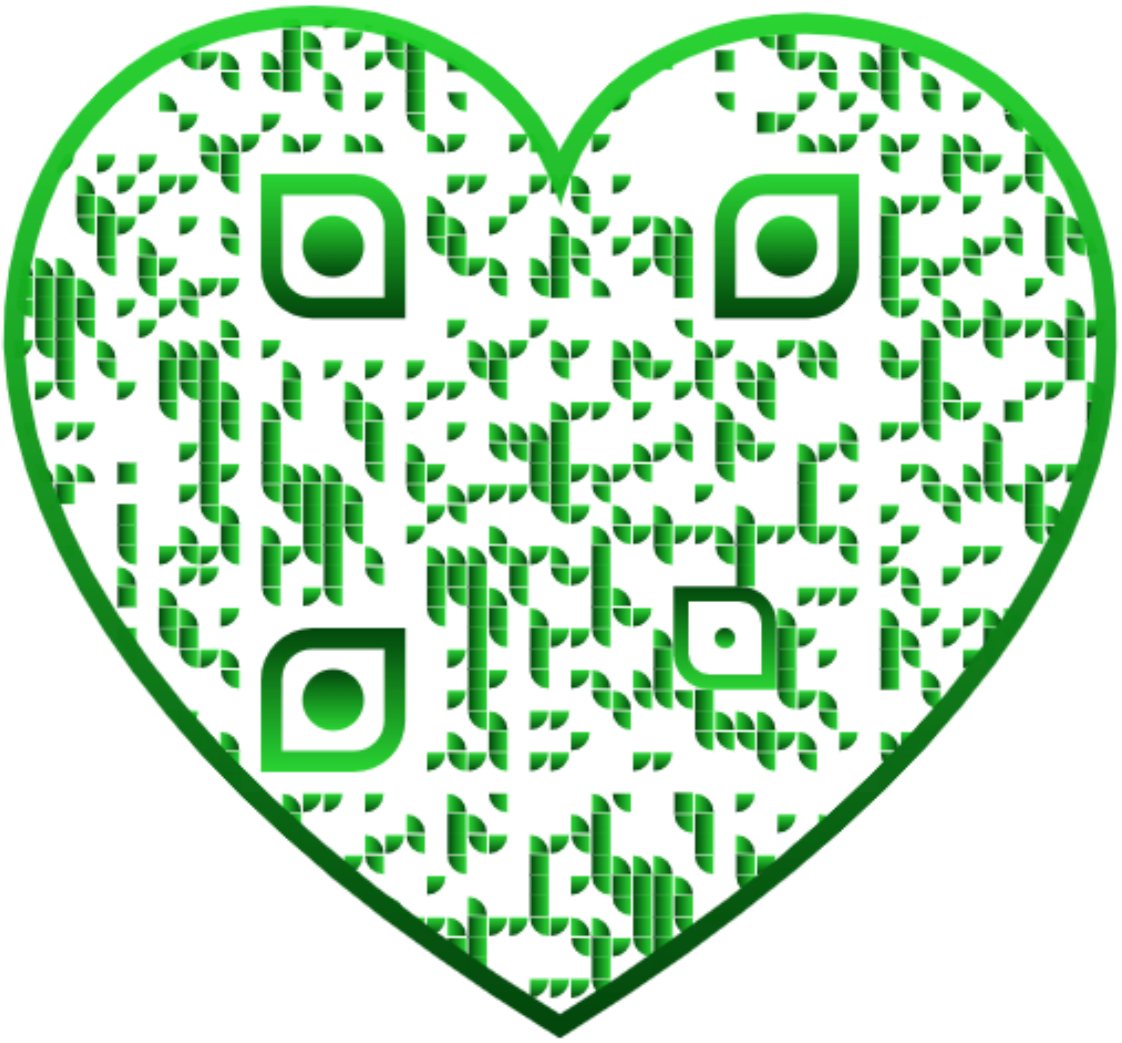

# Mesopotamia

*A Captivating Guide to Ancient Mesopotamian History and Civilizations, Including the Sumerians and Sumerian Mythology, Gilgamesh, Ur, Assyrians, Babylon, Hammurabi and the Persian Empire*

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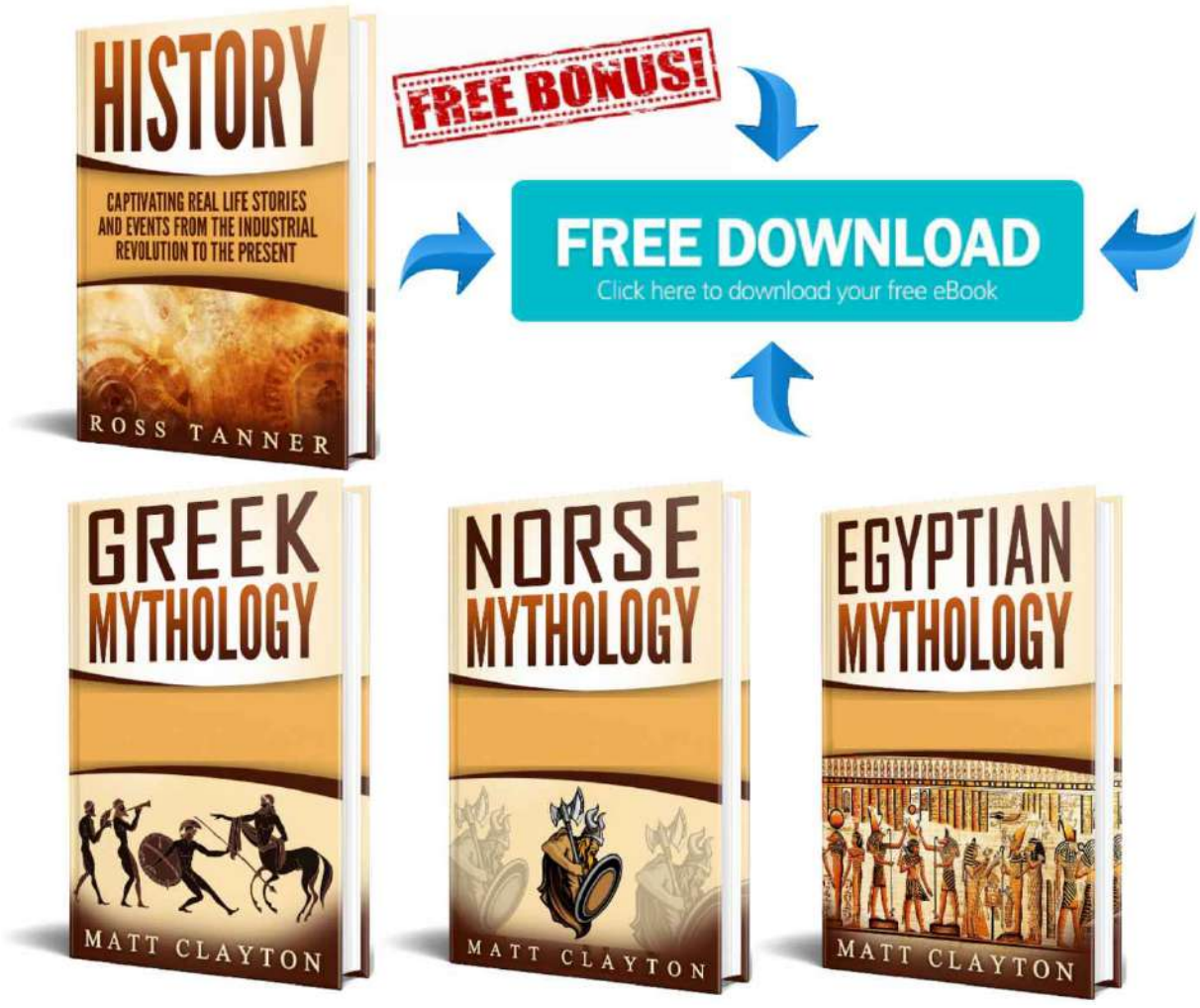


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# Ancient Mesopotamia: The Cradle of Civilization

There are several places around the world that have been dubbed “Cradles of Civilization.” These areas of the world are where humans first settled. It’s where they said goodbye to their nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles in favor of agriculture and permanent settlements. And many of these first villages and cities are still around today, providing a visceral connection between human past and human present.

However, of all the different “Cradles of Civilization” around the world, perhaps no other is as important and influential to the development of human civilization as Mesopotamia. Literally translated from Sumerian to mean “the land between the rivers,” Mesopotamia refers to the valleys and plains in between and around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which are located in modern-day Iraq. Directly surrounding Mesopotamia, stretching as far west as Israel and Egypt and all the way east to modern-day Iran, is the Fertile Crescent, named for the remarkable fertility of the land that made this region an ideal place for human civilization to prosper.

It was in this region of the world that the first act of humanity’s long performance on the world stage would play out. As people settled, different groups became more powerful. Kings and queens popped up in cities and city-states all across the region, and their fight to secure land and resources, as well as their position in history and with the gods, would define some 5,000 years of human history. And in many ways, this story is not over. Much of the current Middle Eastern political landscape, as is the case in most parts of the world, has its roots in these ancient civilizations, making studying these societies just as relevant today as it’s ever been.

But because of the long history of Mesopotamia and the many different people who lived there and controlled it, keeping track of all the different events, and their significance, can be difficult even for dedicated scholars. And this confusion is often what pushes us away from trying to further understand these societies and the impact they’ve had on the world around us.

As a result, it’s important to lay out the order of events and to spend time grasping some of the overall trends in Ancient Mesopotamian history

before diving too deeply into any one civilization. This will provide more context when studying each society, making it easier to understand the importance and significance of each event.

# It All Starts with Sumer

To begin with, it's important to remember that the story of Ancient Mesopotamia, as it pertains to the development of human history, starts with Sumer. The Sumerians were an ancient, non-Semitic speaking group of people who lived in Mesopotamia since possibly the beginning of human existence. The first Sumerian city, Eridu, dates back to the 54th century BCE. It is considered by many to be one of if not the first city in the world. And it was where the Ancient Sumerians chose their center of their civilization to be.

Surrounding Eridu, the Sumerians would settle a number of other cities that would grow to be important political and commercial centers in the ancient world. Larsa, Sippar, Uruk, Kish, Ur, and Nippur, among others, would all grow into powerful city-states, and it was their alliance that brought neighboring cities closer together than they had ever been before.

In addition to a sedentary lifestyle based on agriculture, other reasons the Sumerians are considered to be one of the first real, and therefore most important, civilizations is that they are believed to be some of the first people in the world to have had writing and language. The Sumerians were the first to use pictures for words, and they wrote them down on clay tablets.

Many of the most important Sumerian city-states were settled by c. 3500 BCE, and over the course of the next 1,000 years, they united, albeit it loosely, and grew to be a powerful civilization, using writing, as well as other advancements, such as the wheel, to grow and develop economically, socially, and politically.

Perhaps the pinnacle of early Sumerian history comes with the rise of King Gilgamesh in c. 2700 BCE. He was the king of the city of Uruk, and he was enshrined into Sumerian history thanks to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest pieces of literature in human history

In the story, Gilgamesh goes on a series of adventures in hopes of attaining eternal glory, only to find out that no human can escape death. Interestingly, Gilgamesh, in the epic, visits a man named Utnapishtim, who was famous for having helped the Sumerians survive a massive flood sometime in their

past. Many historians believe this reference to a flood is the same one that inspired the story of Noah's Ark, one of the most well-known stories in the Old Testament of the Bible.

# The Arrival of the Akkadians, Elamites, Babylonians, and Assyrians

Another interesting part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is that it was written in Akkadian, not Sumerian. This at first seems strange, but at the time, the Akkadians, defined by their Semitic Akkadian language, were growing in numbers and influence. By 2330 BCE, King Sargon I of the Akkadians conquered the Sumerians as they marched throughout Mesopotamia, creating the world's first empire.

Fifty years of Akkadian rule came to an end in 2100 BCE, returning sovereignty to the Sumerians. And at this time, the ancient city of Ur was rebuilt. But this brief moment of independence would not last, as the Sumerians would shortly fall to the Elamites, the people who lived northeast of Mesopotamia. And the Elamites would give way to the Assyrians, who hailed from Assur and Nineveh, on the banks of the Euphrates River.

Over the course of the next 1,500 years, the Assyrians would be the region's hegemon. Their large, powerful, and often terrifying armies would dominate from Egypt to Persia and beyond. But this dominance that started toward the end of the 2nd millennium BCE was briefly interrupted by one of the most famous rulers of the ancient world, Hammurabi.

Hammurabi was the king of Babylon, and he rose to power in 1781 BCE. His military advantage allowed him to take quick control of the kingdoms surrounding Babylon, and because of the growing kingdoms to the northwest of Assyria, with whom he was able to form an alliance, he was also able to take back significant amounts of territory that had only recently been conquered by the Assyrians.

During this period, Hammurabi developed his famed *Code of Hammurabi*, which laid out, more definitively than ever before, a clear justice system. This helped him significantly in his quest to consolidate power, but Babylon's success was too closely tied to their leader. When he died in 1750 BCE, Babylon fell with him. Assyria once again became the region's power, and although they were constantly fighting to secure and expand

their borders, the Assyrians would manage to remain the most powerful nation in the ancient world for the better part of the next 1,000 years.

At its peak, the Assyrian Empire stretched all across Mesopotamia, including parts of Persia to the east as well as Palestine, Syria, and Phoenicia to the west. The Assyrian armies also made it to Egyptian borders, and they would have enough military success to be able to lay claim to some Egyptian territory, although they never managed to fully conqueror the Egyptian people. To the north and west of Mesopotamia, the Assyrians controlled much of the land in what is now Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as Asia Minor, which includes much of modern Turkey. The lands in between, Arabia and Syria, also remained largely under Assyrian control for the 1,000 years between the fall of the Sumerians and the rise of the Persians.

Because they managed to remain in control of Mesopotamia for so long, the Assyrians contributed to many of the region's different cultural achievements. For one, their Akkadian language eventually spread throughout Mesopotamia and became widely spoken by most citizens of the empire, helping to bring people together and facilitate trade and other forms of cooperation. Furthermore, the construction of roads connecting some of the major cities in Mesopotamia and the rest of western Asia helped set the stage for the next several millennia of development in the region.

It's also important to note that the Assyrians, due to their considerable wealth that had been amassed through conquest, taxes, and tributes, were able to make great contributions to human culture. The palaces of Assyrian kings helped to define the region's architecture, and the special emphasis on building libraries, particularly the Library of Nineveh, suggests the Assyrians were an advanced civilization looking to keep advancing.

However, for as influential as the Assyrians were in bringing stability and development to the region, their primary source of power was most certainly their military. The Assyrian army was considered to be one of the best in the world, and this meant that weaker kings often surrendered and declared fealty without resistance. But it also meant that those who did decide to stand and fight in the face of near certain conquest would receive harsh punishment if they failed. Not only were kings and other lords often

beheaded or flayed, and then put on display, but the Assyrians were known to be experts at siege warfare. This meant they would cut a city off completely, effectively starving the population until it submitted.

The Assyrians also made heavy use of deportation. Rebellious cities were often drained of their educated and talented people, and these individuals were sent to other parts of the empire. This had two purposes: to prevent further rebellion, and to help support the growth and development of other parts of the empire.

Overall, ruling through terror and deportations worked quite well for the ancient Assyrians. They were able to secure more territory than any other empire before them, and they held onto it for nearly 1,000 years. However, as one might expect, these Draconian forms of government did little to produce real stability. People would have lived in constant fear, and rebelling against a bad king would mean certain death.

Yet for many people at the time, rebellion was well worth the risk, and this means that much of the time Assyria spent controlling Mesopotamia was also spent fighting a near constant civil war. And when we consider that neighboring powers would have been more than happy to contribute to a rebellion inside one of their rival's borders, it's easy to see how the balance of power in Ancient Mesopotamia was a constantly shifting phenomenon.

# The Fall of the Assyrians and the Second Rise of Babylon

In the 7th century BCE, Assyria began to crumble. A series of missteps by Assyrian kings, plus some military defeats and the rising power of their neighbors, all contributed to a much weaker Assyria. The Elamites and the Medes (the inhabitants of what would become Persia, or Iran), plus the Babylonians and Egyptians all descended on Assur, Nineveh, and other parts of the Assyrian kingdom by 625 BCE.

The result of this defeat was that Mesopotamia was left with a power vacuum. Assyria was out of the way, so there was space for a new superpower. But none of the kingdoms that had contributed to the takedown of Assyria were in a position to assume the spot left by their opponent.

At the time, the only kingdom powerful enough to take over where Assyria had left off was Babylon. Previously influential during the time of Hammurabi, Babylon was always a force in the region. In fact, many of the major internal problems the Assyrians had to deal with were caused by either allowing Babylon too much freedom or attempting to control it too tightly.

So, when Assyria fell, Babylon would have likely been the most influential actor in the region, and the rise of King Nabopolassar in 616 BCE gave the Babylonians the push they needed to reassert themselves in the region. This would lead to the formation of what is known as the Neo-Babylonian Empire. But it would not be an empire that would stand the test of time. Instead, it would fall when its leader passed, and this meant that Mesopotamia was once again up for grabs.

Wars broke out between the powers in the region, but ultimately it was an unknown group, the Persians, a collection of Iranian-speaking tribes that had settlements all over the Iranian Plateau, that would band together and finally fill the void left by the fall of the Assyrians.

# The Rise of Persia

When put into a wider context, the rise of Persia is really a remarkable thing. At the time of the Assyrians, no one had even really heard of the Persians. There were mentions of tribes living on the Iranian Plateau, but these were considered to be the problem of the Medes and the Elamites.

However, as the Assyrian Empire began to crumble, the Persians began to gather in strength. And by 550 BCE they had united under their king, Cyrus I, who would later become known as Cyrus the Great, giving birth to a Persian nation.

Within just a little more than ten years, Cyrus the Great would succeed in conquering the Medes and also the Babylonians, bringing all of Mesopotamia under Persian control. After securing himself in the regions surrounding his Persian homeland, Cyrus the Great began setting his sights farther afield. Soon, just as the Assyrians had done, the Persians would control Syria, parts of Arabia, Palestine, and Phoenicia, and they would have a significant presence in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

Part of the reason Persia was able to remain powerful for so long is that, unlike the Babylonians right before them, Persian power did not crumble with the death of their powerful leader. Instead, when Cyrus the Great died, he was succeeded by Cambyses, Darius I, and Xerxes I, all of whom would manage to solidify the gains made by Cyrus the Great, but also expand upon the territory controlled by the Persians.

In the end, the Persians made it much farther west than the Assyrians ever had. They succeeded in conquering Egypt, bringing it entirely, although briefly, under Persian control. Furthermore, the Persians conquered all of Asia Minor, and they even briefly entered Greece, although this attack ultimately failed.

## The Greco-Persian Wars

Greek and Persian history are closely aligned. Persian attempts to invade Greece, first by Darius I, and then more famously by Xerxes I, were part of a 50-year conflict known as the Greco-Persian Wars. During these battles, the Greeks and Persians fought for influence throughout western Asia and eastern Europe. And although the Persians were the early winners, it was

eventually the Greeks who were victorious, and this triumph helped shape the modern world.

Specifically, the Battle of Salamis, which took place in the straits just off Athens, is often considered to be a turning point in human history. Had the Persians been victorious, they would have had an easy march on Athens. Greece would have come under Persian control, and this would have dramatically reshaped Greek culture, which we all know to be one of the most influential in human history.

However, this was not to be. The Greeks defeated the Persians several times, starting at the Battle of Marathon, and then continuing on to Salamis. And these wars also helped push along another development in the history of the ancient world. Specifically, it brought the Greek city-states closer together so as to better defend against their common enemy.

For example, the Delian League represents one of the first examples of strong Greek collaboration, and it was active in inciting rebellions and other destabilizing events within the Persian Empire. And while the Persians managed to survive these attacks, they would prove unable to stop the Greek advance into Persian territory led by Alexander of Macedon, also known as Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great started from Greece, or Macedonia to be specific, and began moving south and east as soon as he took control of a unified Greece. He conquered Egypt, and then he made his way through Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia, until he eventually conquered the Persian capital, Persepolis, in 333 BCE, and continuing on toward central Asia. This led to the fall of the Persian Empire, and it ushered in a new era in Mesopotamia.

# A New Era

The old powers of Babylon and Assyria were gone, and the new powers had yet to come. The Arabs, who would enter the scene in the 7th century CE, would take control over much of the lands previously occupied by the Assyrians and Persians, and this would bring about a Golden Age for the region. It was during this time that the majority of Middle Eastern contributions to the world history and culture were made, and it also helped to shape the way the region is today.

But before the Arabs would come, Mesopotamia would experience a few more thrills. After the Greeks conquered Persia under Alexander the Great, they took over the system of governance set up by the Persians, ruling for nearly 100 years. After Alexander's death, the empire was divided amongst its governors. But shortly thereafter, the Persians were able to restore control, bringing the region back under the control of one of its traditional powers.

This second Persian Empire would war frequently with the Romans, and it was this state of near constant warfare that left them so vulnerable when the Arabian kingdoms began to become much more powerful. Persian lands were conquered, and Islam became the dominant religion and culture in the region. Later on, Persians would regain control of their territory, and this led to the eventual formation of the modern nation of Iran.

The reason this is important is that it helps us mark the fall of the Persians to Alexander the Great as a turning point in Ancient Mesopotamian history. The region would never again be controlled by any of the civilizations that had become powerful throughout the first several thousand years of significant settlement in the region.

However, these civilizations helped to shape the world in which we live today. The kingdoms that were able to survive through the tumult that was the ancient period played a significant role in the formation of the nations we have today. Cultural, scientific, and linguistic developments stemming from Ancient Mesopotamia also helped define the world and what it was to become. And the governmental structures put in place in the ancient world have been expanded upon and improved into the governments we have

today. All in all, these civilizations existed many thousands of years ago, but the impact of their time on Earth can still very much be felt today.

# The Forming of Our World

The three major civilizations of Ancient Mesopotamia—Sumer, Assyria, and Persia—all helped one of the world's first populated regions to grow into what would become known as the "Cradle of Civilization." The Sumerians settled down and made farming an essential part of human life. Then, the Assyrians taught the world what could happen if a civilization dedicated itself to building a massive military machine. And the Persians would carry Mesopotamian and world society one step further by bringing about new forms of government and imperial administration.

Like the Assyrians before them, the Persians were known for their ability to wage war. The Persian Immortals, which was the name given to the force of 10,000 well-trained, well-armed soldiers the Persians maintained at all times, were one of the most feared fighting forces of the ancient world. Kings from all around would bend the knee upon simply hearing that the Persians were headed their way.

However, unlike the Assyrians, the Persians were able to maintain their empire without having to rely solely on force and terror. Instead, the Persians were able to create a highly effective bureaucracy that divided the empire into regions, or satraps. These were directed by regional governors who were meant to carry out the word of the king. The level of autonomy given to these satraps is in part why they were so effective, but it was also the Persian use of writing and roads that made it easy for kings to run the affairs of the state from afar.

In many ways, this type of government represents one of the most significant contributions made by the Mesopotamian people to world culture. Those who managed to conquer Persian territories were able to use Persian institutions as a way of maintaining their power. And this was the model that would be used by many civilizations after Persia, including those that exist today.

The Persians would continue to influence world culture even after they had been absorbed into the Arabian empire. The Persian language still exists today, as does its original region, Zoroastrianism, although Islam is the dominant faith in the region. Furthermore, Persian art, whether paintings or

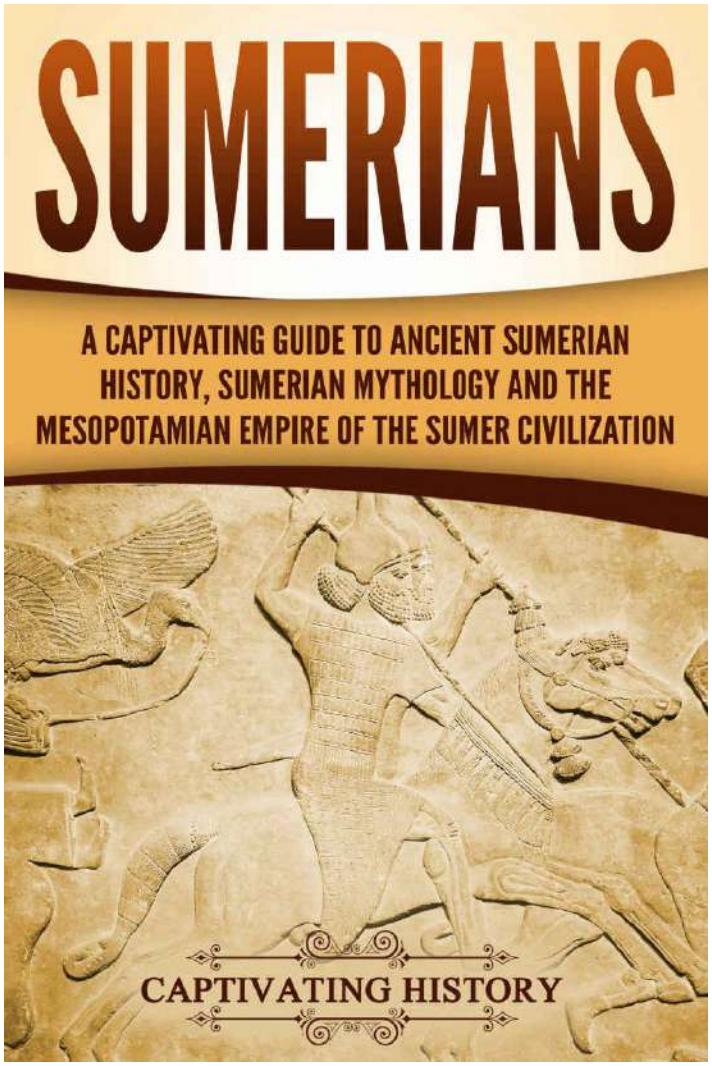
carpets, is world famous, and it was a key driver of economic growth in the region for many years.

# Studying Mesopotamia

Taken together, the civilizations of Sumer, Assyria, and Persia have helped form the modern makeup of Mesopotamia, western Asia, and the world. However, to really understand why things are the way they are, it's important to break up this historical timeline and spend some time learning about each society. Only by doing this will you be able to fully appreciate the powerful impact these ancient peoples had on our modern world.

# Part 1: Sumerians

## *A Captivating Guide to Ancient Sumerian History, Sumerian Mythology and the Mesopotamian Empire of the Sumer Civilization*


SUMERIANS
A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO ANCIENT SUMERIAN HISTORY, SUMERIAN MYTHOLOGY AND THE MESOPOTAMIAN EMPIRE OF THE SUMER CIVILIZATION
CAPTIVATING HISTORY

# An Introduction to Ancient Sumerians

Ancient history is always a fascinating subject. For a layman, it stands as a romantic look of our ancestors - how “times were different” and how people lived on without the commodities modern man has today. For a historian worth their salt, the ancient people are an endless source of information, good indicators of how we’re moving along as a collective humanity, though they captivate on the micro level as well from the individual to the state or country itself. In short, learning from this past equips us to function better in the future, and occasionally chuckle when we find a relatable datum that speaks to us personally.

And on the note of speaking to us personally, each region has a fascination with its own history, and the history of the people immediately surrounding it. Europeans continue to learn from Ancient Greeks and Romans, paying close attention to other cultures that surrounded them such as Illyrians, Thracians, Celts, etc. Africans look to Egypt, Ethiopia, Nubia, and other massive kingdoms and empires that dominated the continent. Asians have a massive number of cultural clusters to research, such as Ancient China and the cultures on the Indian Subcontinent. The Americas and Australia, while themselves descendants from Europeans, look to the cultures of their native peoples, thus we learn more about Aztecs, Mayans, Incas, the Aboriginal people of Australia, the Native American tribes of North America, and so on.

However, all of this had to have started somewhere. And what is often known as the ‘cradle of civilization’ happens to be in Asia Minor, or the Middle East as it is now socio-politically better known. This is the area between the large rivers known as Tigris and Euphrates, and because of this location it bears the name Mesopotamia, “land between the rivers.” But Mesopotamia itself had numerous cultures: Persians, Syrians, Assyrians, Amorites, Elamites, Babylonians, Hittites, Hurrians, and, later on, Romans and various Muslim sects and subgroups. Still, one culture had to be the first, and that would be the Ancient Sumerians.

The sheer importance of Sumerian culture in regards to world culture as a whole is impossible to overstate. This civilization is single-handedly responsible for some of the most major innovations in nearly every field relevant to maintaining a civilized society - this includes religion,

lawmaking, architecture, schooling, art, literature, and even entertainment. Naturally, most of what we see as negative aspects of society were established in Ancient Sumer as well. There wasn't an aspect of Sumerian life that wasn't plagued with corruption or devastation of one form or another. In other words, the Sumerians gave us both the sublimeness of faith and the rigidness of religious thought coupled with a desire for political supremacy. They gave us both the benevolent, caring monarchs and cruel, punishing tyrants; the educated child and the spoiled brat; the hard-working agrarian and the drunken reveler; and the epic empires as well as the pathetic remnants of them. The Sumerians did it all, and they did it first.

Sadly, their culture is long gone. And as is often the case with ancient cultures, as interesting as they may be to a reader or a curious pair of eyes, they tend not to be relatable because of the massive time gap between them and us, which in this case spans no less than 7,000 years, at least. But this book will give you the gist of what Sumerians were like. You will learn about the people themselves, how they organized their society, what they believed and how they believed in it, what their now famous city-states were like and who ruled over them, how they went about their everyday lives, what they invented or reinvented that we still utilize today, how their culture developed throughout the millennia, and how they interacted with other peoples surrounding them. And the reason the Sumerians in particular should matter to you, as both a reader and a proponent of your current culture, is a simple one - being the first, the Sumerians are not just Asia-specific; they are part of our common heritage, and as such are likely our direct cultural and civilizational ancestors. And the old adage of treating elders with respect matters here as well, especially if said elders can return that respect tenfold with invaluable information and fascinating facts.

# Chapter 1

# The Ancient Sumerians In a Nutshell: Who Were They? Where Did They Live? Where Did They Come From? The Timeline of the Sumerian Civilization; Potential Genetic Make-up of the Sumerians

The absolute majority of scholars around the world agree that the Ancient Sumerians were the earliest developed civilization in our recorded history. This doesn't mean that they are the oldest recorded humanoid beings on our planet - recent discoveries in Greece and Bulgaria give us some idea of the earliest human, earlier even than Lucy, who was located in Africa. It doesn't even necessarily mean that their culture was the first to fashion simple tools from stone, iron, or bronze. However, they are the culture that gave us a lot of firsts: the first kingdom, and then empire, the first city-states, the first democracy, the first autocracy; they pioneered writing, schooling, organized religion, lawmaking, art, and literature. Yes, the Sumerians were the first in many areas of expertise.

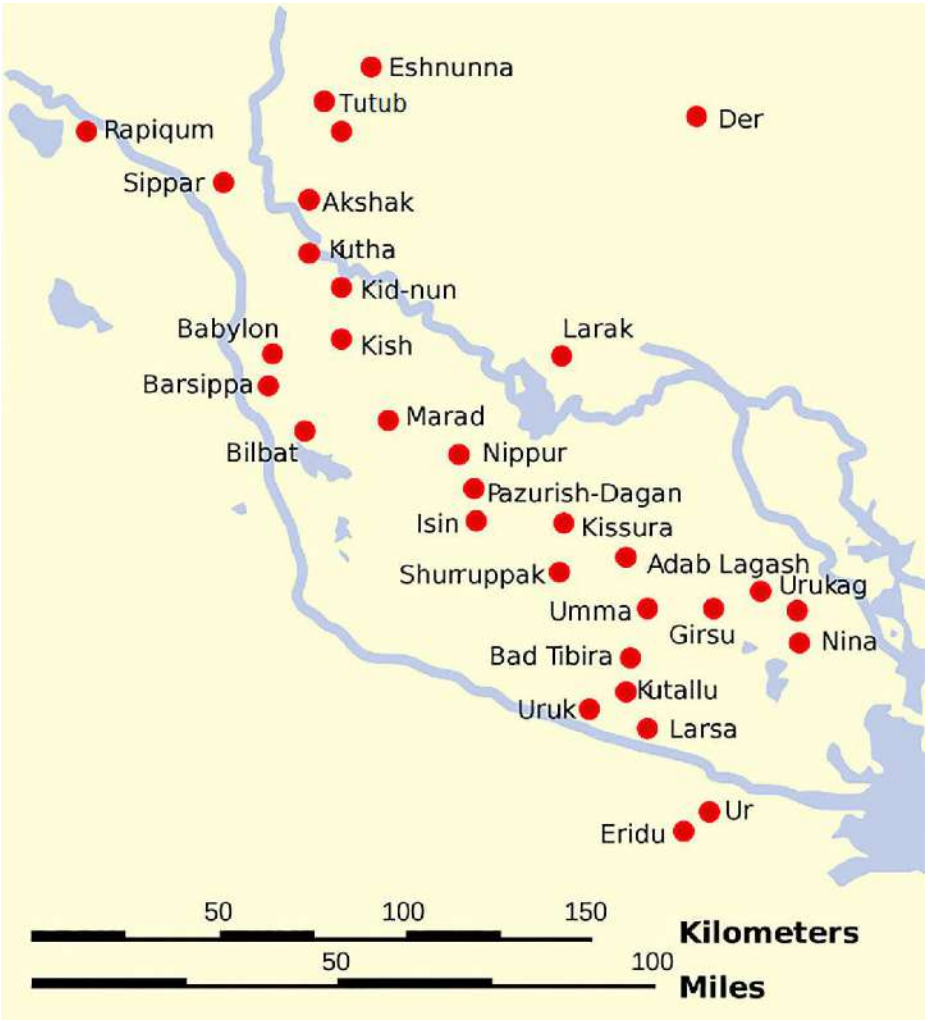
However, we should first discuss the people themselves. We will cover where they lived, their potential place of origin before Ancient Mesopotamia, how their civilization came to be, and how it developed throughout the ages. We will also try and see what their potential genetic make-up was when compared to other people living in the area.

# Who Were the Sumerians?

The Sumerians were a civilization that would go on to influence the entirety of the Ancient Middle East, and their accomplishments and innovations echo in diverse ancient cultures such as Egypt, Greece, Rome, Ethiopia, and more. From a practical, mundane standpoint, they were a highly religious, agricultural society that put great emphasis on art, culture, and the written word. As is the case with all cultures, they developed from simpler hunter-gatherer societies, based on the Bronze age sites scattered about the area that comprised Ancient Sumer. They were an innovative, inventive, imaginative people and, interestingly enough, had parallels with even modern-day societies in both positive and negative aspects of their daily lives. All of this will be covered in more detail in further chapters.

# Where Did the Sumerians Live?

The area where the earliest civilization lived took up the territory of Southern Mesopotamia, in parts of modern Iraq and Kuwait. It is nestled between two important rivers for the region, the Tigris and the Euphrates, as well as the Persian Gulf to the southeast. Their earliest "countries" were numerous city-states that, depending on the time period, either dominated the region, were enslaved by other cities or even other peoples, or acted independently. We will go into more detail on these cities when we cover the dynasties and rulers of Ancient Sumer.




*Map of Sumerian and Elamite cities.* [i] Original image by *Phirosiberia*.

# Where Did Sumerians Come From?

This is an interesting topic that gets touched upon from time to time but not to any major extent. Normally the supposition is that the Sumerians came from either modern-day India or from the west of the two rivers. However, an interesting new archeological development may place them at a different place altogether. Studying several independent factors, such as the religious and cultural importance of lapis lazuli for the Sumerians, the archeological sites where there were frequent excavations of this stone at a time before the Sumerians settled Southern Mesopotamia, and studies of biogeographical DNA of ancient peoples in the Middle East, plausibly places the Sumerians' ancestors in Neolithic and Bronze Age sites such as Gonur Tepe and Anau in modern-day Turkmenistan. If this hypothesis turns out to be true, it would mean that the earliest settlers of Sumer came there after a major drought struck their place of residence close to the lapis lazuli mines. However, despite leaving, they kept their culture and myths which relied heavily on lapis lazuli usage and excavation.

# The Timeline of the Sumerian Civilization

Sumerian scholars have, in the past century and a half at least, managed to piece together a plausible timeline of Ancient Mesopotamia in terms of human settlements and early cultures. The earliest period with permanent towns in the region is called the Ubaid period, named after a small uncovered settlement Tell al-`Ubaid near ancient Ur. This period roughly starts circa 6500 BC and ends around 4100 BC. It encompasses the earliest human culture in the region that predates "modern" Sumerians, and is marked by several major events. The city of Eridu, the oldest Sumerian settlement based on available data, was founded in 5400 BC, and four centuries later, the Ubaid people settled Godin Tepe. At the same time, we get early signs of burials, and the Sumerian culture officially starts blooming into existence.

What follows is the Uruk Period. Five centuries after the Ubaid people settled the Sumerian lands, the city of Uruk was founded, and they built their first temple. The Uruk Period lasts 1200 years, circa 4100-2900 BC. During this period, writing was in full swing in Uruk. It is estimated that it was invented around 3,600 BC with the first religious texts a century later, and it was in frequent use by 3,200 BC.

Right after that follows the Early Dynastic period. It spans from 2900 BC to 2334 BC. It is within this period that we find royal graves in the city of Ur. King Eannatum ruled over the city of Lagash in about 2500 BC, thus forming the First Dynasty of this city. This begins the first recorded empire in Sumer. At this time, non-religious literature such as myths and poetry was becoming a prominent feature in the city-states, especially in Lagash. About a century later, around 2350 BC, their king Urukagina wrote the first code of law; this would become a basis for all future law codes in the immediate region.

In 2334 BC, Sargon of Akkad took over most of Sumerian lands, making him one of the first emperors of the Middle East with a multiethnic, expansive empire. The reign of his dynasty lasted until about 2218 BC, when the Gutian Period begins in Sumer. The nomadic Gutians took control of the Sumerian lands, replacing the Akkadian rulers that succeeded Sargon. A little over half a century after the Gutian conquest, the first tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh were being written. Utu-Hegal took control of Sumer—

and certain Akkadian cities—back from the Gutians at around 2055 BC, and he is succeeded by Ur-Nammu in 2048 BC. This is the period when the Third Dynasty of Ur reigned over Sumer, yet it includes more than just this dynasty.

This period started with the reign of Ur-Nammu and ended a little after 1750 BC, with the invasion of Elamites and the Amorites migrating to the area. There were significant changes during this era, known as the Sumerian Renaissance. Ur-Nammu's successor, King Shulgi, built the so-called Great Wall of Uruk at around 2038 BC, which stood fast throughout the period. In the period mid-1900 BC the last vestige of the Third Dynasty of Ur ends with Ibi-Sin, at around 1940 BC. The final Sumerian, or rather Akkadian, dynasty to reign over what was left of their vast empire was the Dynasty of Isin. The empire itself fell under post-Hammurabi Babylon at around 1750 BC, which is marked as the end of the Sumerian civilization altogether. The Babylonian ruler Hammurabi had codified his famous Code some twenty-two years earlier, based on earlier Sumerian codes.

Naturally, most of these dates are estimates at best. The Sumerian chronology is somewhat difficult to read (there will be more info on this in the Sumerian rulers' section) because of how the cuneiform sources are written. Nevertheless, most of the prominent events can be dated with some accuracy based on peripheral evidence, so we can speak about the Sumerian rise to prominence and decline with a good degree of certainty.

# Potential Genetic Make-up of the Sumerians

This particular topic obviously didn't come up a whole lot in the early days of Mesopotamian studies. But with the advent of DNA research, the question of genetic origins of Ancient Sumerians was raised once more. An extensive survey of Y-chromosome and mtDNA variation among the Marsh Arabs of Iraq heavily implies that they are direct descendants of Sumerians. This also brought about a separate topic, that of whether or not the Sumerians were autochthonous or of Indian or South Asian ancestry. Based on the findings, the Marsh Arabs, who've been in the area of Southern Mesopotamia for generations, share more common ancestry with the Assyrians and the Iraqis than with any other people group (the test groups involved Indians, Mediterranean Europeans, Israeli Druze, Palestinians, the Khuzestani Arabs, Africans, Pacific Asians and more). This implied that the ancestors of the Marsh Arabs did not move from different areas but were autochthonous for at least as long as the Sumerians were present. Naturally, this doesn't go against the hypothesis that the Sumerians originated from the modern-day Turkmenistan region, but rather explains away the potential genetic and even physical make-up of the earliest civilization.

# Conclusion

If you merely look at the timeline presented above, you'll see that Sumerian life and culture spans no less than four and a half millennia. That's an enormous time span that presents a real treasure trove of archeological and historical gems. If we take into account their possible origins, coupled with how they moved and settled in a lower, more arable region, we can accurately draw a picture of even this ancient culture's more ancient past. We can see first-hand how migrations and climate change affected the earliest civilization, how they were responsible for their way of life, their religious beliefs, as well as their possible aspirations and ambitions. In the upcoming chapters, we will take a closer, more detailed, look at the Sumerians' way of life, on every level of society. Naturally, we will cover their technological and cultural advances and how they influenced the cultures around them, bleeding into numerous diverse lands across the known globe in ancient times.

# Chapter 2
# The Social Structure of Ancient Sumerians: Rulers, Priests, Privileged Classes, Ordinary People, Slaves; Gender Differences; Children

For the longest time, many scholars agreed that the ancient Sumerians were a predominantly autocratic, authoritarian society. In other words, they were supposedly more in line with other ancient cultures such as Egypt, China, and even their direct "descendants" the Babylonians. However, this is not the case, or at least not for the entirety of the existence of Sumerians. From their earliest days, the Sumerian city-states actually enjoyed a level of democracy not unlike the one we have today in the Western world. Most major government positions were elected rather than hereditary, and a council made important decisions regarding critical state matters. It was only during increasing warfare between the city states, as well as clashes with the barbaric tribes from both the East and the West of Sumer, that the need for a single ruler arose, and this was when the king or Lugal— "big man" in Sumerian—would take control.

# The Ensi

In the beginning, every city state had a ruler, called an Ensi. In the earlier periods of Sumer, an Ensi would merely act as an elected “governor” of the city, a title he would maintain only until the next one got elected. He was seen as an elected peer among peers and wasn’t the sole person deciding upon important city matters. In fact, there’s scarce evidence that there was even need of Ensis during important court proceedings. During the Early Dynastic Period, an Ensi would represent the patron god of the city. However, in later periods, an Ensi would be subordinate to a Lugal, but this distinction is still up for debate even today. Many powerful rulers would later take up Ensi as their title rather than Lugal. During the last Sumerian dynasty to rule over these lands, the Third Dynasty of Ur, the title of Ensi was almost entirely relegated to local city governors second only to a Lugal. Their positions remained hereditary but only if they were to the Lugal’s liking.

## The Assembly

As stated earlier, the Ensi was initially not the supreme ruler of the city-state in Ancient Sumer. Most major decisions were deliberated on by a bicameral assembly. This assembly consisted of two houses, the Upper and the Lower houses. The Upper house consisted of "elders," mainly members of nobility and priestly classes. The Lower house, consequently, most likely consisted of commoners, mainly men of less noble or even commoner background.

The assembly would deliberate mainly on everyday state matters, such as food production, trade, disaster relief, foreign affairs, legal disputes, and so on. During times of war, they would elect a single military commander for the duration of the conflict, which inevitably led to the birth of the Lugal. What's interesting to note is that during the course of Sumerian civilization, based on thousands of archived correspondence and official documents of the time, this top structure of the Sumerian city state would show the same interchanging periods of prosperity and corruption, not unlike many of our modern countries. In this regard, Sumer is the birthplace of both hereditary monarchy, liberal(ish) democracy, and, as we will see in the section on Sumerian rulers such as Urukagina, government corruption.

# Priests

An Ensi would also act as a head priest of the temple belonging to the city state's patron god, while his wife would be the head priestess for the city's patron goddess. In later years, it was not uncommon for an Ensi to declare himself a god, thus making the temple personnel take care of him directly. Each temple would have two chief administrators, the En and the Sanga. While there might be an overlap between an En and an Ensi (and Lugal, for that matter), from what we know, an En oversaw the duties of all present priests and priestesses in the temple. Each priest or priestess had a different duty, largely related to hymn writing and music composing, food preparation and feeding of "gods," clothing them, etc. Other priests would perform religious duties directly to the people of the city. Not uncommon was the priests' performing of exorcisms, purifications, medical treatments, prayer, and education. The Sanga, on the other hand, handled the business end of the temple. This meant dealing with trade, providing jobs to the city's inhabitants, overseeing at times thousands of jobs around the temple, and much more. While the En oversaw the priests directly, the Sanga oversaw the weavers, chefs, housekeepers, scribes, butchers, guards, accountants, artisans, messengers, and seamstresses. In short, the everyday workers not belonging to a priestly class.

Contrary to what earlier scholars believed, the temple did not "own" all of the land in a city state. In fact, only the temple grounds were under direct temple ownership. This land, unlike the land owned by private citizens outside of the temple, could not be sold, bought, or its ownership passed around in any manner. In short, it belonged to the main god of the city, i.e., to the priests currently occupying it. There will be more word on the temple grounds themselves in a later chapter.

The priests were part of the nobility in Ancient Sumer. Considering how important their role was in maintaining spirituality in Sumerian cities, this is hardly a surprise. As nobles, they participated in matters concerning the city state at the assembly (as part of the Upper house), were involved with Ensi election, and could own private land. Normally this would be land directly adjacent to, or even belonging to, the main temple. Due to their wealth, reputation, and position, most priests were literate and well-educated, often serving as scribes. They served as the original doctors and

dentists of Ancient Sumerians, providing medical aid parallel to spiritual care. Other skills they would excel at included music and art, largely used for liturgical or ceremonial purposes.

In order to become a priest or a priestess, a young man or woman had to come from a noble family, and be of healthy body and mind. Celibacy was required with priestesses, though they could act as stepmothers to their husbands' children. Priestly training was grueling and difficult, but it yielded great privilege and knowledge.

# Sumerian Social Classes and Their Privileges

Based on extensive research of both early and late Sumerian sources, we can divide up the Sumerian socioeconomic structure into four major groups. The first group were the nobles. This would include the Ensi and his spouse, the priests, local princes, and men of renown. As mentioned earlier, they most likely made up the Upper house of the city assembly. This class owned large areas of land, be it through private or family property. This included temple land as well.

The second group were the commoners. They were not as well-off as the nobility and could only own land as members of a family, not as individuals. Nevertheless, if there ever arose any dispute regarding land or even trade, they could participate either with the higher member of nobility or as a stand-in should he be absent. In terms of free citizenry, this would be the lowest class.

The third group were the so-called “clients,” and they consisted of three other subgroups: well-to-do temple dependents, the temple personnel, and the dependents of nobles. The first and the second subgroup were known to possess small patches of temple land, though not permanently. Some members of these subgroups also got compensation in the form of food and wool rations. The last subgroup were most likely paid by their respective nobles in accordance to their work input.

The fourth major group were the slaves. As is the case with most ancient cultures, the Sumerians were no strangers to slavery. However, it was not nearly as rigorous as its later iterations in more powerful societies, like Syria, Persia, and even early European lands. In fact, a Sumerian slave retained some legal rights. For instance, a Sumerian slave was well-treated, largely because a Sumerian master would require a slave in fit condition to work. This doesn’t mean that slaves didn’t get severely punished or treated differently to other chattel during trade, however. A healthy slave would cost less than a donkey on the Sumerian market. And in terms of treatment, if a slave were to try escaping, they would be flogged and branded brutally by their owner.

A male slave in Sumer could engage in trade, and even borrow money to buy himself freedom. If, on the other hand, a slave were to marry a free

citizen of any class, their children would qualify as free citizens as well. Becoming a slave, on the other hand, was unsurprisingly much easier. The most common way was enslaving members of non-Sumerian tribes or even Sumerians from neighboring city states during a war. A free citizen that failed to pay his debts or broke any severe law would also become a slave. Furthermore, parents had the legal right to sell their children into slavery if they faced hard financial times. Astoundingly, a man might turn over his entire family to creditors if he needed to repay his debt, but their term of slavery would not last longer than three years. The majority of slaves were men, considering their physical advantages to women, children and the elderly, and they were usually used mainly to do hard physical labor, primarily field work or construction.

*Left: Male Worshipper of Tell Asmar; Right: Sumerian Woman.*[ii] Original image by *Xuan Che and* Osama Shukir.

# Men and Women of Sumer

During all of the Sumerian dynasties, men were normally treated better than women, although women enjoyed a plentitude of legal rights, like any commoner. They could hold property independently of men, for instance. In addition, they could engage in independent enterprise, doing business like any man would. And legally speaking, a woman could act as a viable witness just like a man would, unlike, for instance, the Islamic culture which would come to dominate this area many millennia later, where multiple women must serve as witness in a single man's stead. And while a woman could not be an Ensi, she could still hold a high position within the temple. In this respect, the Sumerians were somewhat progressive. However, a man could still divorce his wife on light grounds with zero repercussions and even marry a second wife if his first bore him no children.

# Children of Sumer

When it comes to children, most laws that applied to any adult commoner applied to them: they could be sold off, bought, and freed as slaves, and as mentioned in the slavery section, a child born to a free man and a slave woman (or vice versa) would instantly become a free citizen. In terms of family, the children were under the absolute authority of their parents. This means that a parent could disinherit a child at any point in life. However, any land that a parent owned (outside of temple land, of course) was hereditary, meaning that children would get it upon the parents' death. But this was all just true legally speaking. In terms of their familial relationships, children were treated with utmost love and care by their parents. In fact, this is something that was in practice with both biological and adopted children. Adoption was a somewhat common practice in Ancient Sumer, and a non-biological child would have all the rights a direct blood descendant would have, as well as all of the limitations.

# Conclusion

From what we know, the early Sumerians were pioneers in many socioeconomic fields. Their earliest social structures were democratic in nature, and only turned autocratic later on during the time of great conquests and natural disasters. The social classes in Sumer more or less reflect modern society, if we exclude slavery. But even slavery was lighter in nature to the cultures that came after Sumer, including their direct successors. We've also learned that the treatment of women and children was somewhat more progressive than in later cultures, with some important caveats, of course. An important bit to note is the ownership of private property, which will be touched upon in more detail in later chapters. This meant that the power structures were not originally as authoritarian as, for instance, during the time of Lugals, but rather that the most important institution in the city, the temple, operated within its own circle and that all land beyond it was owned by most of the other classes.

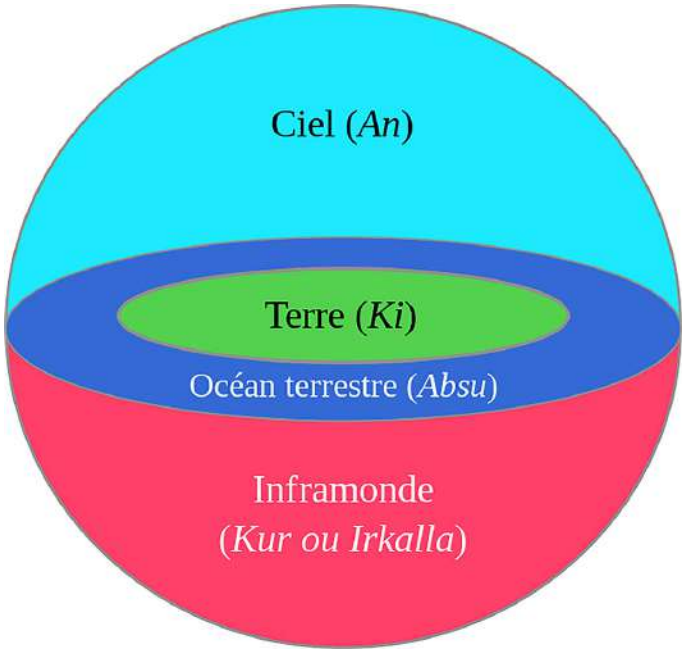
In addition, we can see the earliest forms of a parliamentary system in the form of the city assembly, and from its division into the Upper and Lower houses, we can conclude that matters of state were not just in the hands of nobility. It is endlessly interesting that both the democratic voting system and the autocratic reign of a single monarch stem from the same basic source and that both of these systems, in various forms, continued on existing in countless other cultures hence, all over the world and across many millennia.

# Chapter 3
# The Religion and Mythology of Ancient Sumerians: Cosmology, Major and Minor Gods, Rituals, Myths; Misconceptions and Pseudoscientific Explanations

Understanding this particular aspect of the Ancient Sumerians is of vital importance to world culture in general. And no, this is not a statement made lightly. Most of what we see in the ancient myths of Sumer either directly or partially corresponds to numerous world myths, the hierarchy and behavior of gods, the creation of man, the great flood, the giants, the creation myths, all of these were present in Sumerian mythology first. Now it's important to note that many modern scholars claim that other Near Eastern cultures didn't necessarily "borrow" these myths, or elements thereof, and reinterpret them as their own. Rather, the consensus is that all of them, Sumerians included, wrote their myths based on a common source.

Considering the lack of substantial data on this subject, due in part to the state of the available data (missing tablets, damaged tablets, entire sections that cannot as yet be translated or interpreted, etc.), most of what we know about Sumerian beliefs comes as a result of patching together pieces of information. It doesn't help that oftentimes a scribe from a Sumerian temple would be inconsistent with their work, as tablets were found describing the same event in the same temple, in the same period no less, vastly different. Nevertheless, enough has been found to at least provide a basic idea of what Ancient Sumerians believed and how they acted according to their religious duties.

# The Cosmology of Sumerians




*The Cosmology of Sumer.*[iii]

If you were to have asked an Ancient Sumerian what their world looked like, they would have described it as a closed dome surrounded by a primordial, saltwater sea. Beneath what was the terrestrial earth, or Ma, lay a freshwater ocean, and it was called Apsu, or Abzu. The operating belief was that all fresh water—rivers, lakes, streams, rivulets—all came from this subterranean ocean. Directly below Abzu was the Sumerian underworld known as Kur. This was where the deceased ended up, be they humans or gods. The dome presented a heavenly firmament, where most of the gods dwelled and whose chief deity was An. In the beginning, the heaven and the earth, or rather the heavenly firmament and the terrestrial ocean, were essentially one being, called Anki, and they came out of the primordial waters known as the goddess Nammu. Between heaven and earth there was a substance called Lil, which could roughly be translated as “atmosphere” or “air.” Nammu is important because she/it surrounded the entire known universe of Sumerians as an endless ocean. The universe itself would remain unmovable within Nammu.

# The Sumerian Pantheon

A god, or dingir, was in the eyes of Sumerian people of faith an anthropomorphic being that boasted immense immortal powers, and was responsible for overseeing a particular aspect of the known universe. A minor contradiction exists in terms of the actions of these gods in the many written works of Ancient Sumerians—despite being powerful and immortal, they still required food and water, and they could be harmed, killed, sent to the underworld, severely punished, and so on. In fact, not even the chief deities were immune to this. This humanizing of Sumerian gods is an element that would pass over into other Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions and most likely stems from priests' attempts to explain away the universe through familiar means.

Analogous to the organization of the city-state, the Sumerian pantheon was also hierarchical in nature. Initially, the pantheon recognized seven major deities who "decreed the fates of man," with one serving as the king, and at least fifty minor deities known as "the great gods." By the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the number of deities went as high as 3600. The major seven gods were An, Enlil, Enki, Ninhursag (or Ki), Nanna-Sin, Utu, and Innana.

An was the progenitor of all gods. In fact, the term Annunaki, "children of An and Ki" or "princely seed," the name for the gods who decreed the fates of man, derives from him. Having come from the primordial waters Nammu, he copulated with the earth goddess Ki, producing children. They formed a single entity known as Anki, which would later be separated by their son Enlil. An was the chief deity of early Sumerians; however, his role shifted into obscurity as he gave way to Enlil in importance. His role was that of the god who contains the entire universe, and who is the supreme authority of all other gods and men.

Enlil, originally the god of wind, storms, air, and earth, has been recognized as the chief deity of the Ancient Sumerians, claiming the role from An. It's not known to historians why this was so, but this trend seems to have continued with, for example, the Greeks, where Zeus became the dominant god as opposed to more chthonic deities that came before him (and lest we forget, Zeus also commanded the storms). Aside from separating An and Ki upon his birth and making the earth habitable for humans, Enlil also regularly helps out the humans in many ways—he was, for example, the

patron god of agriculture, inventing the tools, such as the pickax, for working the fields. During the great deluge, he rewarded the surviving human, Ziusudra, with immortality and a place for him and his wife to dwell among the gods. However, despite Enlil's major role in the pantheon, he was not exempt from punishment if he were to commit an atrocious act, as we shall soon see.

Enki was the son of An and the ruler of the Abzu. He was also worshiped as the god of mischief, wisdom, knowledge, crafts, and creation. His role as the god of water seems to have come at the expense of Nammu, the primordial waters' goddess. There were numerous myths and stories recorded about or including Enki. His position as the god of wisdom placed him as the deity that would put Enlil's commands into practical use. Normally, Enlil would issue a decree that would be laconic or vague in nature, and Enki would take care of the finer details.

Ninhursag, the mother goddess of the earth and the mountains, was probably one of the most important deities in Ancient Sumer, almost rivaling the other three and often even placed higher than Enki in official and unofficial documents of the time. She is oftentimes conflated with the earth goddess Ki, and has accrued many names throughout Sumerian history: Ninmah, Nintu, Mamma, Mami, and Aruru. She served as both a fertility goddess and a tutelary deity of the seven major gods, and rulers of Sumer would often state that they were "nourished by her milk." Ninhursag was the mother of all beings, the exalted lady, and the birth-giver.

These four deities were somewhat higher up among the original seven. The remaining three are Nanna (or Sin, in Semitic), the son of Enlil and Ninlil, and his son and daughter, Utu and Inanna (Ishtar in Semitic).

Nanna was the moon god, born from non-consensual coitus between Enlil and Ninlil. He was known as the protector of shepherds, though in later periods would himself be exalted as the head deity. Utu was the sun god in charge of enforcing justice and helping those in need. His twin sister, Inanna, was probably the most prominent deity in all of Ancient Sumerian writing. She was the goddess of sex, fertility, love, beauty, desire, combat, war, justice, and political power. Most of the myths describe her as very cunning and, despite enforcing justice much like her brother Utu, she was known for doing numerous acts that were to the chagrin of other gods and

decidedly not anywhere near “justice.” Her myth was so powerful that each Sumerian ruler, despite the city he dwelled in, would go through the rite of “marrying” Inanna, much like the original myth of her marrying another god-king, Dumuzi.

There are various other gods that do not fall under the main seven whose importance varies depending on what they preside over. Dumuzi, the husband of Inanna, was the god of shepherds, and his sister Geshtinanna the goddess of agriculture and, interestingly, dream interpretation. Ereshkigal was the older sister of Innana and the ruler of Kur, or the underworld. We will touch more on her a bit later. Some other gods and goddesses include Nidaba (goddess of writing and education), Ninlil (consort of Enlil and goddess of wind), Nergal (possibly another ruler of Kur, alongside Ereshkigal), Ningal (goddess of reeds), and Ninurta (god of farming, hunting, law, and scribes). There are, of course, numerous other minor deities that presided over different aspects of the known world. The majority of them either remain unnamed or named but with no clear description of their dominion.

# Heaven and the Underworld

The Sumerians envisioned the heavens as domes made of different precious stones. The lowest dome was the home of the stars, and it was, according to legend, made of jasper. The dome directly above it was made of the so-called sagglimut stone. This was the home of what the Semites would call the Igigi, or lesser gods that fall under the Annunaki. Not much is written about them directly by the Sumerians, though, so any detail on them is pure speculation. The final dome was An personified, and this was where the gods dwelled.

No human was allowed to enter the dominion of the gods (with some minor exceptions). Whenever a Sumerian would die, according to mythology, they would go directly to Kur. An interesting concept that is almost unique to the Sumerians is that their underworld isn't necessarily the place of eternal darkness. As the sun sets and gives way to the moon on the surface, it would actually illuminate Kur, essentially bringing "daylight" to it. Within the realm of Ereshkigal, the dead would be judged by the sun god Utu and at times even his father, the moon god Nanna. Those judged righteous would go on to live in bliss for eternity. Those judged unfavorably would suffer for an eternity.

Much like the city-states and the heavens, the underworld was also hierarchical in nature. Its upper echelon was made up of higher deities, like Ereshkigal and her husband Nergal. They would themselves have underlings in the form of certain Annunaki and fallen sky gods. In addition, servile demons known as galla or gallu would see to the lords of Kur's every need, though their primary purpose was to drag unfortunate souls to the underworld. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the humans that wound up there after dying, irrespective of how they got judged upon entry.

# Religious Rituals and Practices

Most of the religious rituals were performed in the temple, which was the most important institution in an Ancient Sumerian city-state. Each city had a chief deity that presided over the city and to whom the temple was dedicated. As such, the priests had an active duty to satisfy this god directly, through rituals and celebrations, whereas the laity did so through ritual sacrifice and backing the temple with money or goods. There would be daily tributes in form of fruit, vegetables, meat, water, beer, and wine, with the unavoidable incense burning. Based on the names of some months, we can ascertain certain holidays and celebrations in Sumer, such as "the Month of Barley Eating of Ningirsu," "the Month of Gazelles' Eating," "the Month of the Feast of Shulgi," etc. Naturally, there was a New Year's festival, which probably landed sometime during late spring. Each of these festivals lasted approximately six days or so, laden with feasts, drinking, and exaltation of gods.

An important ritual was the so-called "holy marriage." The ruling Ensi would "marry" the goddess Inanna, who would be represented by a priestess-hierodule selected specifically for that occasion. This ritual was to mirror Inanna's marriage to Dumuzi the shepherd god from the popular myth at the time that included the two deities. This festival most likely took place during the first day of the new year.

An important detail to note is the burial of the nobility. There is good reason to believe that an upper class Ancient Sumerian was not just buried with material riches, like the rulers throughout the ancient world at the time, but was buried with family members. In other words, the ruler was not to go to Kur alone but rather in the company of his relatives. There are some details scattered all over the literary and physical findings that corroborate this, but as of today, it's still not conclusive.

# Sumerian Myths

Any Biblical scholar will note the similarities between certain Sumerian myths and events that occur in the Bible, specifically the Old Testament. This, however, cannot be said for the creation myth, as even today we do not have a conclusive version of how Sumerians saw the birth of their universe. The best clue we have is in the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the myth is more or less described in the cosmology section of this chapter. In short, the heavenly god An and earthly goddess Ki (later Ninhursag) came out of the primordial waters Nammu, mated, and gave birth to Enlil, the god of storms. Enlin then separated them, thus separating the heaven and earth. Enki followed, becoming the god of the watery abyss Abzu. Plants and animals, as well as the major geographic locations such as the two important rivers of Mesopotamia, Euphrates and Tigris, were then created. Other gods followed suit, fathered first by An, then by his sons and daughters. Ereshkigal was banished to Kur, becoming its ruler. And these are just the 'Cliff Notes'—numerous other gods and items were created in numerous ways, some still unknown to us even today.

The myth of the creation of man was more or less a basis for all other Middle Eastern cultures at the time. The gods mixed their essence with clay and created the early man. This early man was weak and feeble and would not be able to survive on his own. At some point, the gods decide to flood the world, which would wipe out all mortal men and bring about the time of new, better men. Mortal men were called "black headed ones," a term that described Sumerians directly.

Naturally, the flood myth has direct parallels to the one from the Bible, but surprisingly also to tens, if not hundreds, of similar myths world-wide. Ziusudra, the only survivor of the flood (along with his wife, of course) is almost word-for-word a doppelganger of Noah. Or rather, Noah is his doppelganger, chronologically speaking. Naturally, Ziusudra is given instructions to build an ark to survive the deluge; it starts raining for a week or so, and his boat lands in what is effectively the Sumerian Garden of Eden, an area known as Dilmun. Fun fact: Dilmun was also suspected to be the place where the entire creation of the universe originated, its epicenter, if you will.

Another rather fascinating myth that has its parallels in the Hebrew Bible is the one with allusions to the creation of the woman. In fact, when we look at the myth related to this, an injured Enki gets his organs healed by separate goddesses. The one who heals his rib is called Nin-ti, literally "the lady of the rib," but also "the lady who makes live." The allusions to Eve being made from Adam's rib are all but cast-iron proof of how influential Sumerian myths were to the descendants of Jews.

But these are just some of the myths. Most of the myths we have saved (in various stages of preservation) deal with gods and their machinations. Some of the most notable revolve around Inanna. There's the famous one where she descends into the underworld and, in order to save herself from her sister Ereshkigal's wrath, she frames her unfortunate husband Dumuzi. Another famous Inanna myth is the one where she manages to steal the divine laws, or the Me, from Enki and bring them to earth. When it comes to Enlil, a famous myth involves him raping his consort, Ninlil, and being banished to Kur for a while until he manages to escape, engendering a few other gods in the process. Very few myths contain mortal men in significant roles, and none deal with mortal women in any capacity. But these myths have set a precedent for the myths of nearly every culture that followed—as pure and honorable as these gods could be, they were still human in their behavior, and as such could fail and be punished. This way, the justice they espoused became an absolute truth to the Ancient Sumerians, and they followed it to the letter in order to achieve bliss in the afterlife.

# Misconceptions and Modern Pseudoscience

Rather than a regular chapter conclusion, we have to address a dangerous trend in history today. The emergence of pseudohistory and pseudoarcheology in the last two decades or so has done irreparable damage to the scientific community and the Sumerians who, due to their air of intrigue and evidence largely preserved in fragments, are regularly the favorite "target" of pseudohistorians. Authors and media presenters such as Zecharia Sitchin, Erich von Däniken, Giorgio Tsoukalos, David Childress, and others would misrepresent or misinterpret Sumerian terminology and depictions to back up their theory that ancient astronauts manufactured our universe. The most often cited claim is that the term "Annunaki" doesn't mean "princely blood" but rather "those who from the heaven came." Following this, they claim that An was the god of mining and that his tribe had to mine gold for the atmosphere of his home planet, a certain "Nibiru." Naturally, researchers and scholars of ancient cultures challenged these claims successfully, but this particular current of pseudohistory is gaining more prominence with the advent of mass media. This book exists in part to give you the empirical facts about the oldest recorded ancient civilization and to give you proper context and sources to learn about the Sumerians. Remember to always check the sources you're given and to keep an open, skeptical mind to everything.

# Chapter 4
# The Sumerian Kingdoms Chronology: The List of City-States, Dynasties, and Prominent Rulers

In Chapter 1 we covered the basic timeline of the Sumerian civilization, touching upon a few select details and individuals. Following that, we've discussed the Sumerian people in general, as well as their mythology and belief system. During both of these, we partly touched upon how their city-states function, how they interacted, how they either grew or fell. In this chapter, we will examine the city-states in a more detailed way. We will cover the major and minor states that marked Sumerian history. Following that, we will discuss all of the major reigning dynasties and their most prominent rulers, whatever title they may carry. Throughout the text you will get acquainted with how the Sumerian state rose to prominence, what its ups and downs were, what notable events marked its history, and how it ultimately fell and disappeared from the stage of world history.

# Sumerian City-States

To anyone acquainted with the Ancient Greeks, the concept of a city-state is not that foreign. Earlier societies would comprise of a city (made up of an urban, usually fortified, center), adjacent semi-urban areas, and the immediate arable land surrounding it. There are modern parallels to this all over the world—in Europe alone, we have Vatican City, Lichtenstein, Monaco, San Marino, and Malta. In Asia, there's Singapore, and in Oceania there's Nauru. So the concept of a city-state is not a new one to our civilization. But it all started with the Sumerians.

Before we discuss the major cities in Ancient Sumer, we should discuss what made up a city-state back then. A common misconception is that the city-state encompassed only the temple and its grounds, with maybe a few adjacent neighborhoods. However, the territory of a Sumerian city-state could expand well beyond this area, to the point where it made up the percentual majority of the whole state. As stated, each city had a temple dedicated to its guardian deity and would either be governed by an Ensi or a Lugal. Other than temples, the cities contained houses, a palace for the king (which would come later), farms, public squares, avenues, promenades, large gates, and possibly even separate buildings for the schools (the Edubba); irrigation canals permeated the cities, which were separated from each other with demarcation stones. However, the city center was later walled off from its adjacent villages, where farmers could have easier access to arable land.

The temple, also known as the ziggurat, was the most impressive and most essential structure of a city in Ancient Sumer. We will discuss both the ziggurat and other buildings of Sumer in Chapter 6.

The make-up of the city was not aesthetically pleasing, nor did it show any particular structural planning done upfront. Most of the streets were winding, narrow ones that would tangle about, not making a clear grid. The houses were clustered without much order, with both the small and the large ones often nestled together in an unseemly fashion. While most of the nobility and the upper classes, or rather most of the Sumerian citizens of one particular state (an estimated four out of five), lived within the city walls, it was by no means a pleasant experience, not unlike the modern cities of today, or even major cities of the Ancient world like Rome or

Athens. It is interesting to note, then, that the Sumerians effectively gave us our first major urban centers. Again, speaking in estimates, a city-state of Sumer could have anywhere between 5000 and 200,000 citizens, so it's not that far off to say that, for instance, Uruk was the largest city in the world at its peak, giving us our first "world record" in largest number of inhabitants living in one clearly marked populated area.

Roughly thirty city-states are known to us today based on archeological and written evidence, all ranked differently in importance, prominence, and overall presence. The most notable ones to modern archeology—and probably the most active centers of civilization at the time—were Eridu, Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Larsa, Isin, Bad-tibira, Kish, Shuruppak, Umma, and Girsu. Other cities or villages that were either less relevant or of equal importance but lacking archeological data, include Godin Tepe, Adab or Udab, Akshak, Borsippa, Der, Dilbat, Eshnunna, Gudua, Harbidum, (possibly) Kesh, Kisurra, Kuara, Larak, Marad, Nagar, Sippar, Zabala, and a still unnamed settlement near modern Abu Salabikh. We will only briefly touch upon these.

## Eridu

Most historians still argue that Eridu is the world's oldest city, though there are some disputes regarding this that involve the city of Nagar. As far as Eridu is concerned, according to Sumerian myth the city was founded before the great deluge, somewhere around 5400 BC. Its location is close to the mouth of the Euphrates river, near the Persian Gulf. According to some studies, three separate ecosystems of human activity formed the city: the irrigation-based agriculture system of Samarra culture, the fisher-hunter culture of the Marsh Arab ancestors, and the nomadic herders of Semitic descent. It rose to prominence in the early Ubaid period, with an estimated 4000 people inhabiting it. However, by the end of the 2$^{nd}$ millennium BC, it was all but abandoned, finally falling into ruin at around 6$^{th}$ century BC.

Eridu's first primary deity was probably female, later identified with the goddess of Earth Ninhursag. Following this, Eridu would be host to a different god, Enki, through the ritual of holy marriage of the gods. The major temple, and the city's most noteworthy landmark, is Enki's temple, known as E-Abzu, or the House of the Aquifer. It would be later known as E-Engur, or House of the Waters. Traces of fishbones and other marine life

suggest that Enki's cult was strong even in the city's later history. Aside from this temple, the remains of an unfinished ziggurat dedicated to Amar-Sin of the Third Dynasty of Ur were uncovered, as well as potential traces of a massive temple.

## Uruk

The city famous for Gilgamesh, its numerous ruling dynasties, and a canal system that earned it the nickname "Venice of the desert," Uruk was definitely one of the most important centers of Ancient Sumer and was probably the biggest city in the world at its peak. Uruk was located East of the Euphrates river, and its history would suggest that it came into existence after a merging of two districts, the Eanna district and the Kullaba, or Anu, district. Of the two, the Kullaba district is older and roughly coincides with the date the Eridu was founded, making the district antediluvian and thus one of the oldest cities of Ancient Sumer. Not much has been saved in this district save for a ziggurat dedicated to An and a few more temples and buildings, notably the White temple, the predecessor to the ziggurats. The Eanna district is far better preserved, with an entire list of buildings, including houses, temples, halls, a public bath, a few courts, etc. It is in this district that we see the first forms of cuneiform emerge, making this the birthplace of writing.

Upon the district merger, the city started to flourish. Its agricultural surplus and a rich irrigation system made it a proper metropolis, and it proceeded to expand and gain prominence in the Ancient Sumer as early as the Ubaid period. However, throughout most of its later history, the city will be under direct control of Ur, another city-state. Sometime during this era, the massive wall, over five miles long, was erected around the city; this act was attributed to Gilgamesh. One of the Sumerian rulers, Ur-Nammu, planned on building a massive ziggurat in Uruk during the Sumerian revival period, as part of a major city overhaul. After the fall of Ur, Uruk remained largely irrelevant until it was claimed by Neo-Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians around the middle of the 8$^{th}$ century BC. During this time, it regained a lot of its former splendor, but its Sumerian populace was largely integrated into other societies by this point.

Uruk is known for being a home to two major deities: An and Inanna. Both had major temples and powerful cults that had been in practice since before

the flood. Inanna in particular seems to have been the city's favorite, boasting several temples and sanctuaries, one of which is still not located. A number of artifacts were located in the city, including figurines, mosaics, vases, statues, assorted pottery, and more. The most famous of these is the Mask of Warka, a representation of a female face (probably Inanna's) that earned the title of the "Sumerian Mona Lisa."

## Ur

Much of Sumerian history is linked to this grand city. Due to its position on the Persian Gulf, near modern-day Tell el-Muqayyar, it was a large and busy port with many travel-only canals. Thanks to the myriad of documents saved, as well as the royal tombs uncovered, we can assess that Ur was a wealthy city, inhabited by priests, doctors, scribes, teachers, artisans, farmers, and slaves. It boasted a number of prominent rulers such as Ur-Nammu and Shulgi, members of the famous Third Dynasty of Ur, the last (largely) Sumerian dynasty to dominate the area. The period itself was known as the Sumerian revival, or Sumerian Renaissance, as evidenced by the numerous restoration and construction projects and expansion of art and literature, as well as the codification of law in the form of The Code of Ur-Nammu. It was during this time that the famous Ziggurat of Ur was built, the most distinguishing feature of the city.

The city itself was agricultural in nature at first, with major hunting and fishing cultures present. In terms of patron deity, Ur worshipped the moon god Nanna. In fact, the name of the city comes from the name of this deity. His temple is located within the Ziggurat of Ur and bears the name E-Kishnugal. The city itself had a population of approximately 65,000 people, and it fell under non-Sumerian rule in the mid-1900s BC with the Amorite conquest. However, it retained its prominence until it was abandoned at about 500 BC.

## Lagash

Lagash was a big center of art and trade within Sumer. As an independent state, it saw successes under two primary dynasties, the first bearing rulers such as Eannatum, the ruler of the first empire of the Ancient world, and Urukagina, known for his many social reforms. The second dynasty, which came into prominence after the Sargonic period of Akkadian rule, gave prominence to kings such as Ur-Baba and Gudea, during whose time trade

with many far-away lands took place and art flourished. Even after its fall to the Third Dynasty of Ur, Lagash remained a crucial strategic and cultural site. However, it wasn't necessarily the center of political power at all times during its history; another city, Girsu, served as the capital of the Lagash kingdom for a while, and most religious services took place there rather than in Lagash proper. Both cities remained largely inhabited until about 200 BC, well after the last Sumerians were integrated into neighboring cultures.

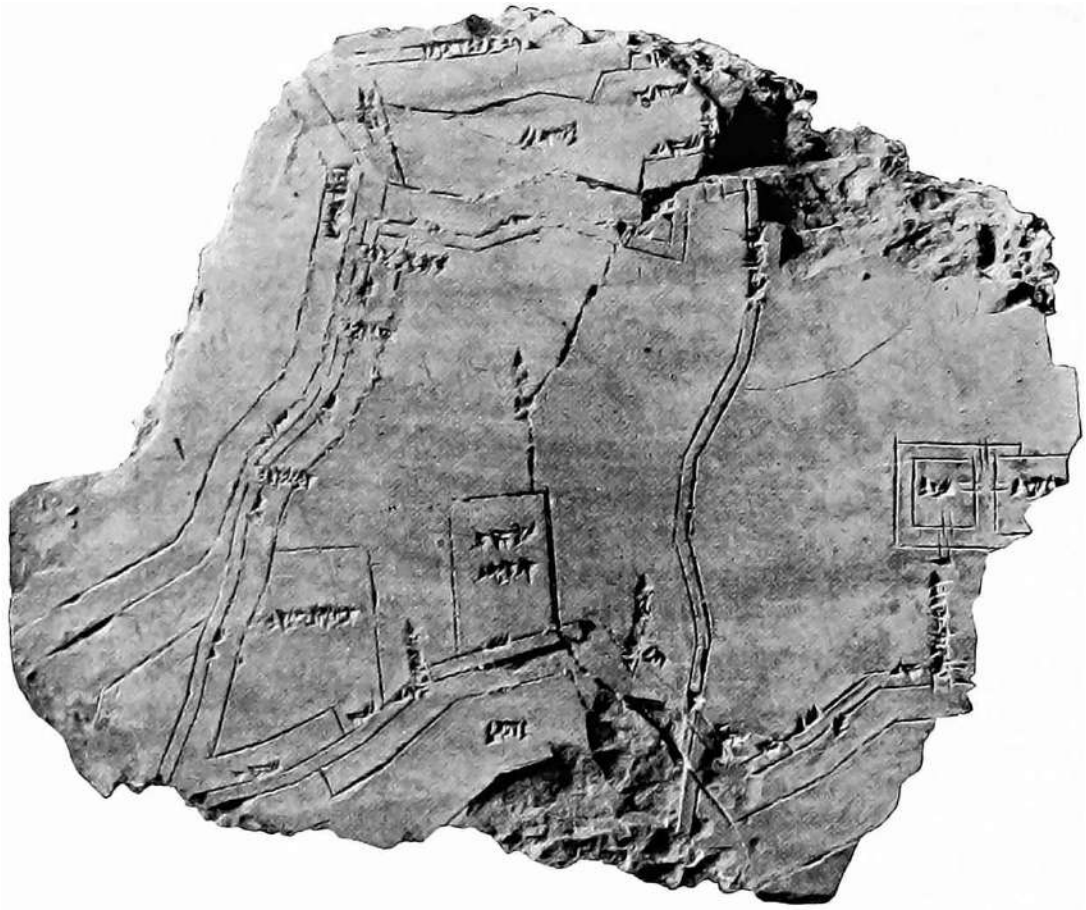
The patron deity of Lagash was Ningirsu, a different name for Ninurta, the god of barley. Ningirsu literally translates to "lord of Girsu," showing how important the city was to Lagash. The main temple of Lagash, dedicated to Ningirsu, was called E-Ninnu.

## Nippur

Out of all the major city-states of Sumer, Nippur was the only one that never enjoyed political dominance, or even political prominence. It was viewed as a sacred city to the entirety of the Ancient Sumerian civilization, and controlling it was crucial.

The city's patron deity was the leader of the Sumerian pantheon, Enlil. Its temple was known as Ekur, a name that literally translates to "mountain house" and represents the most sacred building in all of Sumer as the assembly site of the gods. This temple was restored by Akkadian conquerors in the Sargonic era, thus making it a far-reaching multicultural religious site. Further restorations were done during the Third Dynasty of Ur, which included rebuilding temples, walls, and shrines. The oldest known map in the world is that of a section of Nippur, walled off from the rest of the city proper.

Nippur was an important site of religious rites and rituals. Sumerian rulers from both sides of the Sargonic era continued engaging in intermittent ceremonies at the famous Enlil shrine, all the way to the last Sumerian-born ruler Ibbi-Sin.



*Map of Nippur circa 1400 BC.*[iv]

## Larsa

Larsa, despite being an already existing site as early as the time of Eannatum's reign, never really rose to prominence under Sumerian rulers and was largely a dependent city-state until the Amorite Dynasty of Larsa was formed sometime during the last years of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Its most famous ruler was the very last, Rim-Sin I, and under his reign some ten to fifteen cities were under Larsa's direct control. While this isn't a large stretch of territory, Rim-Sin I's Larsa underwent a large number of agricultural and architectural changes. Rim-Sin I fell in battle against Hammurabi in 1699 BC, from which point Babylonians took full control of the city.

As stated, Larsa at its peak was an Amorite-led city, but its Sumerian roots are well recognized. Its patron deity was the sun god Utu, and his cult was practiced there. His temple was named E-Babbar, and it shared this name

with the temple dedicated to the same god in Sippar. Interestingly, both cities are antediluvian, i.e., founded before the mythical flood.

## Kish

Kish is widely known to be the first city to have post-flood kings. Thus we have the earliest Sumerian ruling dynasty with rulers confirmed to have existed beyond myth and legend, the First Dynasty of Kish. The first twelve kings that are listed in the famous Sumerian Kings' List are not known to archeology, and even after and including the thirteenth ruler, Etana (regarded as the actual founder and first king of Kish), the following eight rulers cannot be verified by anything other than written myths. Enmebaragesi, the twenty-second king on the list, is the first ruler known from archeological sources and is also one of the most well-known of kings of Kish next to his son, Aga. Two more influential rulers are worth mentioning. The first is the progenitor of the Third Dynasty of Kish, as well as the only woman in the king's list, Kug-Bau, later worshipped as a goddess. The second is Ur-Zababa of the Fourth Dynasty of Kish, whose cupbearer will later become Sargon the Great, conqueror of Sumer and ruler of Akkad.

Kish was extremely important in terms of political significance. Ancient Sumerian kings would often take up the title "king of Kish" to add to their legitimacy as monarchs of all lands, a tradition which even Sargon of Akkad continued after conquering the city. During the state's peak, Kish's ruler would serve as the mediator in the conflict between Lagash and Umma, merely adding to the importance of the city. The patron deity of Kish was Ninhursag, the Earth goddess. In Akkadian times, one of the two titular deities to take over patronage in Kish was none other than Inanna.

## Umma

Not much is known of early Umma, however the city was definitely significant to Ancient Sumerians, to the point that it was mentioned in myths. None of its rulers gained any prominence in terms of conquest, and the most famous historical records tell of a famous frontier dispute with Lagash, which Mesilim of Kish mediated. Umma was always under vassalage of more powerful city-states, like Ur. During the Third Dynasty of Ur, Umma saw a cultural expansion and became a major provincial center. The earliest known calendar issued by king Shulgi was crafted in

this city, and served as the basis of calendars to other Mesopotamian and Middle Eastern lands.

The patron deity of Umma was a minor war god Shara, and his temple was named Emah, lending more credence to how lower the city-state is placed compared to others. However, judging by the tens of thousands of recorded cuneiform documents of administrative nature, we can safely assume that life in Umma was anything but mundane, and that the city-state played a more principal role than originally assumed.

## Shuruppak

Another in the list of antediluvian city-states, Shuruppak was predominantly known for its massive storages of grain, with more silos than any other Sumerian city at the time. Not many rulers of this city are known to history (a few are mentioned in myths and poetry, but no substantial archeological evidence of their reign was found), and it quickly fell out of prominence sometime in the late 2000s BC, later briefly mentioned as an area dominated by the Isin Dynasty. The city was, in fact, destroyed by a fire which helped preserve most of its clay tablets and mud brick buildings. Aside from grain storage and distribution, Shuruppak is known for some metallurgy, with arsenical copper objects found dating as far as 4000 BC.

With its linkage to grain storage, it's no wonder Shuruppak's principle deity was Ninlil, the goddess of air and grain. Her temple was called E-Dimgalanna.

## Bad-tibira

The last in the line of antediluvian city-states, Bad-tibira, much like Umma, didn't hold a lot of political power independently. According to legend, Bad-tibira was the second city to have kings, right after Eridu. Three rulers are mentioned here, the most notable one being Dumuzi the Shepherd, later deified. None of these rulers are known to recorded history, however. What is known from scant archeological data is that, at some point, Aman-Sin of the Third Dynasty of Ur held power in the city, and that the later rulers of Isin and Larsa respectively claimed dominion over it.

Bad-tibira had two principal deities, the aforementioned Dumuzi and the goddess Inanna, and their temple was called E-Mush. Rulers who held power over Bad-tibira would be styled as Lugal E-Mush locally. It is likely

that the practice of “marrying” Inanna came from Bad-tibira based on all of this.

## Isin

Isin existed for as long as most post-flood cities but never rose to prominence until the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur and the effective end of the Sumerian empire. Its first and most prominent ruler, Ishbi-Era, relocated the capital from Ur to Isin, then defeated the last ruler of Ur, Ibbi-Sin, whom he previously served. The city flourished under the so-called First Dynasty of Isin, capturing most major cities such as Ur, Nippur, and Uruk. However, due to infighting and powerful attacks from neighboring Larsa, Isin was slowly declining, until it ultimately succumbed to Rim-Sin I.

The patron goddess of Isin seems to have been Bau, the consort of Ninurta. However, the kings of Isin largely continued the traditions that included the worship of other gods, like Inanna.

## Other Cities

While not as considerable as the city-states listed above, the remaining Sumerian settlements were nonetheless active and played vital roles in ancient history. Godin Tepe, for instance, is archeologically the second city to be permanently settled after Eridu, and its position might indicate that it was a significant trading center for early

Mesopotamians. Adab had its fair share of outside rulers, both Sumerian and Akkadian, and various artifacts were excavated at the site of this ancient city, including a male bust supposedly of its most well-known king Lugal-Anne-Mundu. Unlike Abad, whose sole king is the only one known to us via the Sumerian Kings’ List, Akshak boasted six kings before ultimately falling to Kish. Borsippa, while minor compared to its larger counterparts, evidently played a vital role among Sumerians, having been built on both sides of a lake southwest of Babylon and boasting a large ziggurat that probably served as the inspiration for the Tower of Babel. Der is a city whose archeological site is, unfortunately, in such a bad shape that there’s no practical point in excavating it, but it seems to have been frequently mentioned in early Sumerian and later Akkadian and Babylonian documents, primarily in how it was destroyed or sacked.

A smaller city, Kisurra served as a center of commerce and trade from Early Dynastic period all the way to Early Babylonian domain of Sumer, showing steady decline at the time of Hammurabi. Kuara, on the other hand, was essential in establishing a few cultural and religious elements that would come to dominate Sumerian and other, later cultures. The legendary third king of Uruk, Dumuzi the Fisherman, was supposedly born here, as was Marduk, the son of Enki, whose cult was initiated here and was widespread. The city's patron deity, on the other hand, was Nergal. Little is known of its written history, though, apart from a few details regarding its occupation.

Marad, in a similar vein to Kuara, is best known for its religious background and its occupation by other states. It boasted a ziggurat, Eigikalama, that was dedicated both to the god Ninurta and the local deity Lugalmarada (his name literally meaning "king of Marad"), erected by one of Naram-Sin's progeny. Nagar, later known as Tell Brak, was best known for expanding from a minor settlement into one of the biggest cities in the ancient world. Though not originally Sumerian, Nagar did have a brief period of Sumerian, or rather non-Semitic, rulers. Its dominion was passed from empire to empire throughout its long existence during Ancient times.

As mentioned before, Sippar, like Larsa, was a place that worshiped the sun god, either Sumerian or Akkadian, and it had a temple with the same name dedicated to him as the one in Larsa. Despite numerous documents uncovered in Sippar, not much is really known about this city. Similarly, not much is known of Zabala, a city located in the Dhi Qar governorate of Iraq. Throughout what little is known of Zabala's history, it has been under direct control by other major cities (Lagash, Ur, Larsa) or other major cultures, such as the Akkadians. They worshiped Inanna, with her temple later built by Hammurabi in the city.

The remaining cities, like Dilbat, Harbidum, and Eshnunna, are rather small and do not play central roles in Sumerian society at large, though it's noteworthy to point out that Eshnunna was at the very edge of the Sumerian empire but nonetheless maintained a heavily Sumerian-influenced culture. Larak is a city that apparently played a major role in Sumerian life, but not much is really known of it to say what that role was. The city known as Kesh has not been located yet, as some archeologists deem it only to be an alternative way of saying or spelling Kish, and the site near Abu Salabikh

has so few records that not even its name is known to us. Nevertheless, each one of these cities had their temples, houses, areas, and canals, and based on what information we do have on them, they were still a part of Sumerian everyday life.

# Sumerian Dynasties

Ancient Sumer is known to have the first recorded ruling dynasties in the ancient world, largely assisted by the Sumerian Kings' List, compiled during the Third Dynasty of Ur in several different copies. However, before we delve into the dynasties themselves, it is important to note that there are rulers not listed in this document, and that the ones who "made the cut" are not necessarily historical people that actually lived and that they might as well be mythological. The timelines themselves will be largely omitted, considering that the Sumerian sexagesimal system is difficult to convert to modern-day numbers with any accuracy, wherein even some rulers known to us via archeological data are marked to have ruled over several centuries, which is impossible biologically.

## The Early Dynastic Period – Antediluvians, City-state rulers

The so-called Early Dynastic Period lasted from about 2900 BC to about 2350 BC, although the dates differ. More generally, it's divided into Early Dynastic I, Early Dynastic II, and Early Dynastic IIIa and IIIb, but this isn't a historical but rather an archeological division. Generally speaking, it's the period that ranges from the first-known rulers to the rise of the Akkadian empire. The dynasties and the rulers that comprised them are as follows:

1. Antediluvian rulers. Most of them are legendary, and the list is as follows: Alulim, Alalngar, En-men-lu-ana, En-men-gal-ana, Dumuzid, the Shepherd, En-sipad-zid-ana, En-men-dur-ana, and Ubara-Tutu. As stated, most of these are legendary and no historical record exists of them ruling over the region.
2. The First Dynasty of Kish. This is the dynasty where we find the first archeological evidence of some rulers. The list is long, and it includes: Jushur, Kullassina-Bel, Nangishlishma, En-Tarah-Ana, Babum, Puannum, Kalibum, Kalumum, Zuqaqip, Atab (or A-Ba), Mashda, Arwium, Etana, Balih, En-Me-Nuna, Melem-Kish, Barsal-Nuna, Zamug, Tizqar, Ilku, Iltasadum, En-Me-Barage-Si, and Aga of Kish. Some of these rulers bear Akkadian names, and out of all of them, the earliest written contemporary proof of one's existence we have is that of En-Me-Barage-Si.

3. The First Dynasty of Uruk. A lot of these kings made it into myths and legends and were highly popular among the Sumerians at the time. The list includes: Mesh-Ki-Ang-Gasher of E-Ana, Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, Dumuzid, Gilgamesh, Ur-Nungal, Udul-Kalama, La-Ba'shum, En-Nun-Tarah-Ana, Mesh-He, Melem-Ana, and Lugal-Kitun.
4. The First Dynasty of Ur. This list includes four rulers: Mesh-Ane-Pada, Mesh-Ki-Ang-Nuna, Elulu, and Balulu.
5. The Dynasty of Awan. This was the first dynasty of Semitic (Elamite) origin to dominate Sumer. There were supposed to be three rulers, but other than the fragment of one's name, none are known to history, so the information on them is scant. But this does give us a good insight that the third millennium BC saw dominance by Elamites at least in a span of three centuries.
6. The Second Dynasty of Kish. Kish reclaims control from the Elamites, and spans eight kings in their second dynasty: Susuda, Dadasig, Mamagal, Kalbum, Tuge, Men-Nuna, Enbi-Ishtar (not a Sumerian name), and Lugalngu.
7. The First Dynasty of Lagash. Neither of the Lagash dynasties are on the Sumerian Kings' List, but there is ample evidence of their existence. In fact, it's the first dynasty to produce a Sumerian emperor. The list includes: Enhengal, Lugal-Sha-Engur or Lugal-Sugur (who was just an Ensi, not a Lugal), Ur-Virte or Ur-Nina, Akurgal, Eannatum, En-Anna-Tum I, Entemena, Enannatum II, Enentarzid, Lugalanda, and Urukagina. Another king not often listed is Ur-Nanshe, the father or Eannatum, who probably came from a non-royal lineage.
8. The Dynasty of Hamazi. Little is known of this kingdom, including its location. The king's list only includes one king, Hadanish, but from records we can ascertain that there was at least one more king, Zizi. Hadanish's position on the list would suggest that this kingdom had a great impact on the Sumerians at the time.
9. The Second Dynasty of Uruk. Having defeated Hadanish, the king of Uruk reclaimed control. This dynasty spawned three

kings: En-Shag-Kush-Ana, Lugal-Kinishe-Dudu or Lugal-Ure, and Argandea.

10. The Second Dynasty of Ur. Of the three rulers listed, the last remains nameless, and the two preceding him are Nanni and Mesh-Ki-Ang-Nanna II.
11. The Dynasty of Adab. This dynasty birthed a single ruler, Lugal-Ane-Mundu.
12. The Dynasty of Mari. This is the second Semitic dynasty to reign over the Sumerians. It birthed six rulers: Anbu, Anba, Bazi, Zizi or Mari, Limer, and Sharrum-Iter.
13. The Third Dynasty of Kish. The only listed ruler of the first city to reach three dynasties was also the only woman ever listed in the Kings' List, Kug-Bau or Kubaba. She is listed as a "Lugal" or "king" rather than a queen.
14. Dynasty of Akshak. The first dynasty to come from this city gave the Sumerians six rulers: Unzi, Undalulu, Urur, Puzur-Nirah, Ishu-Il, and Shu-Suen of Akshak. Like with many of these lists, some of the rulers down the middle were actually contemporaries of the last ruler of the previous dynasty, in this case, the female king Kug-Bau.
15. The Fourth Dynasty of Kish. Once again, it was the city of Kish that reached the fourth in the line of dynasties before any other. This particular dynasty spawned eight rulers: Puzur-Suen, Ur-Zababa, Zimudar, Usi-Watar, Eshtar-Muti, Ishte-Shamash, Shu-Ilishu (not a Sumerian name), and Nanniya. This was the last time a Sumerian ruler from Kish would have dominion over Sumer.
16. The Third Dynasty of Uruk. This dynasty produced only one powerful ruler, Lugal-Zage-Si. His defeat at the hands of the Akkadians marks the end of the Early Dynastic Period.

## The Akkadian Period, or the Sargonic Era

This period marks the first time most of the Sumerian states were under a single ruler who was not of Sumerian descent. This age started with the conquests of its founder, Sargon of Akkad (whose name it bears), arguably

the first real emperor to known history in the real sense of the word, and it ended roughly two centuries later, after the Gutian invasion. Three dynasties are noteworthy here, listed below.

17. The Dynasty of Akkad. The most powerful Semitic dynasty to rule over Sumer before it (Sumer) ultimately collapsed under the Babylonians centuries later. The rulers of Akkad are as follows: Sargon of Akkad, Rimush of Akkad, Manishtushu, Naram-Sin of Akkad, Shar-Kali-Sharri, Irgigi, Imi, Nanum, Ilulu, Dudu of Akkad, and Shu-Durul.
18. The Fourth Dynasty of Uruk. This dynasty probably had control over the city in the waning days of the Akkadian empire, and their early rulers were probably contemporaries of both the Dynasty of Akkad and the following Gutian rulers. This list includes: Ur-Ningin, Ur-Nigir, Kuda, Puzur-Ili, and Ur-Utu or Lugal-Melem.
19. The Second Dynasty of Lagash. Much like the first, this dynasty is not listed on the Kings' List. They held control over the city proper and some key locations. During this period, Lagash prospered as a center of art and culture. The rulers include: Lugalushumgal, Puzer-Mama, Ur-Utu, Ur-Mama, Lu-Baba, Lugula, Kaku or Kakug, Ur-Baba, Gudea, Ur-Ningirsu, Pirigme or Ugme, Ur-Gar, and Nammahani.

## The Gutian Period

This was the time the mysterious Gutians took control over Sumer. Considering their notable inferiority regarding law, culture, and anything concerning state matters when compared to the Sumerians, their rule was destined to suffer a sharp decline, which actually happened. This was the so-called "Dark Ages of Sumer." Only the later Gutian kings managed to infuse some progress to their realm but were nonetheless exiled by the end of their century-long dominion. This period is marked by one major dynasty, that of the Gutians.

20. The Gutian Dynasty. Two rulers are known not to be on the King's List but who still existed and ruled over the kingdom. One ruler of this dynasty, the second to last known as Si'um, is not verified to be the name missing from the list. The first two

rulers of this dynasty, the ones not on the list, are Erridupizir and Imta or Nibia. The remaining rulers include: Inkishush or Inkicuc, Sarlagab or Zarlagab, Shulme, Elulmesh or Elulumesh, Inimabakesh, Igeshaush, Yarlagab, Ibate, Yarla or Yarlangab, Kurum, Apilkin, La-Erabum or Lasirab, Irarum, Ibranum, Hablum, Puzur-Suen (a different one from the same-named King of Kish), Yarlaganda, Si'um or Si'u, and Tirigan. After Tirigan's defeat, the Gutians were no longer a part of Sumerian, or Mesopotamian public life in general.

## The Third Dynasty of Ur, or the Sumerian Renaissance

After the defeat of the Gutians, the Sumerians underwent a cultural and social overhaul. This was the time of rebuilding, restructuring, and reclaiming. While the Third Dynasty clearly dominates this period, it's not the one that started it. However, it will be the last proper Sumerian dynasty to have control of the entirety of Ancient Sumer, as its last ruler falls under the state of Isin.

21. The Fifth Dynasty of Uruk. With this dynasty, Uruk will have officially become the only city-state to span five. This would also be the last dynasty of Uruk, and it only spawned one ruler, the one who defeated the Gutians, king Utu-Hengal.
22. The Third Dynasty of Ur. Arguably the most famous dynasty known to archeology, it would also be the last dynasty of Ur, as well as the last Sumerian dynasty to keep the empire together. Many famous and well-revered rulers came from this dynasty, and these are: Ur-Namma or Ur-Nammu, Shulgi, Amar-Suena, Shu-Suen or Shu-Sin, and Ibi-Suen or Ibbi-Sin.

## The Isin-Larsa Period

While the Sumerian empire completely fell through with the death of the Third Dynasty of Ur, two independent states held large swathes of land for themselves, including important religious and political centers. While Isin initially thrived, Larsa would eventually expand and claim it under the last ruler of Larsa, Rim-Sin I. Shortly after, the entirety of Ancient Sumer would fall under Hammurabi and his followers, ending the Ancient Sumerians and ushering in the age of Old Babylon.

As the name would suggest, two major dynasties ruled over their respective cities, one being the Sumerian Isin, the other Semitic Larsa.

23. The Dynasty of Isin: this dynasty was started by Ibbi-Suen's military official, Ishbi-Erra. It would go on to spawn numerous rulers and, while officially a Sumerian dynasty, all of them spoke and wrote Akkadian. The list of rulers of Isin is as follows: Ishbi-Erra, Shu-Ilishu, Iddin-Dagan, Ishme-Dagan, Lipit-Eshtar or Lipit-Ishtar, Ur-Ninurta, Bur-Suen, Lipit-Enlil, Erra-Imitti, Enlil-Bani, Zambiya, Iter-Pisha, Ur-Du-Kuga, Suen-Magir, and Damiq-Ilishu.
24. The Dynasty of Larsa: the kings of this city-state were Amorite in origin, making them the last Semitic peoples to reign over Sumer before the Babylonians took over. Their peak was reached at the age of their last ruler, after which they were defeated by Hammurabi. The rulers of Larsa were: Naplanum, Emisum, Samium, Zabaia, Gungunum, Abisare, Sumuel, Nur-Adad, Sin-Iddinam, Sin-Eribam, Sin-Iqisham, Silli-Adad, Warad-Sin, and Rim Sin I.

# Notable Rulers of Sumer

## Enmebaragesi of Kish

A ruler from the First Dynasty of Kish, Enmebaragesi was most likely a contemporary of Gilgamesh and is the first ruler whom archeology can verify to have existed at some point in history. Based on myth and written data, he defeated the Elamites and ruled for some time before Gilgamesh defeated him.

## Enmerkar of Uruk

Either the son or the grandson of the sun god Utu, Enmerkar was the builder and founder of Uruk. The earliest recorded epic poems deal with his exploits. Other than founding arguably one of the most important cities of Ancient Sumer, he is said to have issued construction of a temple in the city-state of Eridu. Legends claim that he waged successful campaigns against Aratta, both military ones and ones of wit.

## Lugalbanda of Uruk

A contemporary of Enmerkar and his successor, Lugalbanda is also better known to myth than history. He is recorded as having been a warrior in Enmerkar's army and fighting the neighboring states, notably Aratta. Myths also see him paired up with the goddess Ninsun. His legends also predate those of Gilgamesh, much like the legends involving Enmerkar.

## Gilgamesh of Uruk

Gilgamesh's historicity is still a question of debate, but the mythical figure of this king is now an important and unavoidable part of world culture. No less than five recorded myths exist of Gilgamesh's successes, but in terms of practical, possibly historical events, he might have been the one to rebuild the walls of Uruk and the temple of the goddess Ninlil in Nippur.

## Meshanepada of Ur

The founder of the First Dynasty of Ur, Meshanepada was known for his diplomatic ties to the kingdom of Mari and for his dominion over the region. He rebuilt numerous temples, including some at Nippur, where we find written data of his reign. His sons largely continued his tradition of building and managing upkeep at major temples such as the ones in Nippur. Meshanepada also held the coveted title "king of Kish," something many

rulers after him will continue to do to assert their case as the kings of the whole of Sumer.

## Eannatum of Lagash

A ruler not on the Sumerian King's List, Eannatum was probably the first emperor to claim all of the Sumerian lands, a title still questioned by scholars today. Eannatum conquered most of the known Sumer, including Ur, Nippur, Akshak, Larsa, Uruk, and Kish. Outside of Sumer, he conquered parts of Elam and demanded that Mari pays tribute. These areas were quick to develop revolts and his reign here wasn't as firm as in Sumer. Eannatum was known for building temples, especially in Lagash, as well as rebuilding entire cities, like Nina. After his victory over the city of Umma, the famous Stele of the Vultures was erected in honor of this triumph.

*The Stele of Vultures, a detail, circa 2450 BC.*[v] Photographed and *u*ploaded to *https://commons.wikimedia.org* by Eric Gaba.

## Urukagina of Lagash

The last ruler of the First Dynasty of Lagash was Urukagina, notable for his legal reforms. Prior to his reign, Lagash was beset by corruption at the state top, with priests and nobles taking advantage of the less-fortunate. Urukagina, in a sense, put draining the swamp into practice and removed all corrupt officials from office, issued city-wide assistance of the poor and needy, and commissioned what would be the first recorded code of laws in human history. He was also somewhat infamous for his laws regarding adultery when committed by a woman, which are reminiscent of how Islamic fundamentalists punish women in contemporary society

## Lugal-Anne-Mundu of Adab

The only recorded king to come from Adab, Lugal-Anne-Mundu is best known from an inscription describing his reign. Evidently, he had conquered vast areas of both Sumerian and Semitic territory, and a time of relative peace ensued, except for a few rebellions. One such rebellion was led by a coalition of thirteen Semitic governors, all of whom were crushed severely.

## Kug-Bau of Kish

The only woman on the Kings' List, Kug-Bau ruled over the Sumerians as the only exponent of the Third Dynasty of Kish. The Kings' List mentions that she was an ale wife, both cementing the role of women as providers of ale in Ancient Sumer and, surprisingly, the first instance of a woman not born in nobility reaching the status of a monarch in recorded history. Later cities and people groups would worship Kug-Bau as the goddess Kubaba, with shrines emerging all over in major states.

## Ur-Zababa of Kish

This king is known primarily for two major factoids. The first, more plausible, is that he was the grandson of the female king Kug-Bau. The second, which is more legend than fact, is the recounting of his time as king while Sargon was his cupbearer. It is true that the two were contemporaries and that Sargon came from humble background, but the account of what they said to each other is most likely fiction.

## Lugal-Zage-Si

Lugal-Zage-Si was the very last Sumerian ruler before Sargon claimed most of Mesopotamia and is the only king of the Third Dynasty of Uruk. He himself briefly held dominion over most of Sumerian cities, reigning from Uruk as his capital. He was the one who defeated Ur-Zababa and claimed Kish as his own.

## Sargon of Akkad

Also known as Sargon the Great, this Akkadian ruler is widely accepted as the first modern-day variant of an emperor, having subdued nearly the entirety of Mesopotamia under his rule. Like many before him, he held the title "king of Kish," having served there as the cupbearer to Ur-Zababa. During his time, numerous temples and shrines were rebuilt and it was a period of general blossoming of the Akkadian empire. He had bested Lugal-Zage-Si and effectively ended Sumerian dominion over their own people for the following two hundred plus years.

## Gudea of Lagash

The most famous ruler of the Second Dynasty of Lagash, Gudea came from a more humble background, marrying the daughter of the previous ruler. He did not call himself "king" or "Lugal," but rather Ensi. Under his dominion, Lagash flourished culturally and artistically. He maintained control of vast areas that were independent of the slowly-failing Gutian empire. Gudea was known for issuing numerous statues of himself, which still exist today in relatively decent condition. He also issued a series of legal and religious reforms, including the ability for women to own land. Both trade and agriculture flourished under Gudea in Lagash, and his retaining the title of Ensi speak of a ruler who was possibly god-fearing and willing to return his city-state to its old values. Like all other Lagash rulers, he is not on the Sumerian Kings' List.

*Gudea of Lagash, circa 2120 BC.*[vi]

## Utu-Hengal of Uruk

The last king to come from Uruk, and the only member of its Fifth Dynasty, Utu-Hengal is credited as the one who defeated the Gutians and forced them out of Sumer. While he was evidently a skilled general, his reign wasn't a long one, as he was succeeded shortly by Ur-Nammu of Ur. His daughter did marry the first ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur, thus making king Shulgi his grandson.

## Ur-Nammu of Ur

The progenitor of the grand Third Dynasty of Ur, Ur-Nammu was the author of the first proper legal code in our history, much more detailed and to-the-point than that of Urukagina before him. He was also known for both building and rebuilding numerous temples and complexes, and the famous Great Ziggurat of Ur was constructed during this period. Roads, housing, and infrastructure in general were revamped during Ur-Nammu, and the order was restored after decades of Gutian rule. He died on the battlefield and was succeeded by his son Shulgi.

*Ur-Nammu of Ur, cylinder impression, circa 2100 BC.*[vii]

## Shulgi of Ur

Continuing where his father left off, Shulgi finished building the Great Ziggurat of Ur, and his rebuilding of walls, temples, and especially roads did not go unnoticed. His most major achievement seems to be the improvement of the schooling system and the importance he placed in the

written word. An interesting fact to note is that Shulgi built what might be the world's first inn.

## Ibbi-Sin of Ur

Ibbi-Sin was the last Sumerian ruler over the entire Sumerian area. He was remembered as a weak, ineffective ruler whose actions led to the sacking of Ur and the eventual triumph of the Elamites, as well as the domination of Isin as the new capital of Ancient Sumerians. He was ultimately defeated by his own governor, Ishbi-Erra, probably in cooperation with the Elamite troops. We learn from the Lament for Ur that his capture was a rather pitiable one, and it is unknown when or where he died.

## Ishbi-Erra of Isin

The direct "inheritor" of the Sumerian lands, Ishbi-Erra was not generally seen as a member of the Third Dynasty of Ur but rather as a progenitor of his own dynasty. He carried on with the rites and rituals of Sumerian rulers, even though his kingdom largely spoke Akkadian, himself included. He enjoyed numerous military victories over the Elamites and the Amorites, and though he held most major Sumerian cities under direct control, his territory was nowhere near as vast as that of Sumer at its peak, let alone Akkad.

## Damiq-Ilishu of Isin

Damiq-Ilishu was the final king of Isin, and the last Sumerian-in-origin-only king to rule over most of Sumerian lands. His age was marked by steady decline, and one after another the cities under Isin's control were falling under Larsa and the Babylonians. He himself was defeated twice, first by Sîn-Muballiṭ of Babylon and then by Rim-Sin I of Larsa. Strangely enough, Damiq-Ilishu became somewhat of a folk hero to the cultures that succeeded Sumer, with the ruler of one following dynasty (Sealand) even naming himself after him.

## Rim-Sin I of Larsa

Rim-Sin is notable for being the king of Larsa both at its peak and at its fall. He is also the very last ruler to hold dominion over Sumerian lands before they fell under Hammurabi, whom he lost against. Before his eventual fall under Hammurabi, Rim-Sin I was known to have conquered a few important cities such as Uruk and Isin and to have destroyed Der. He even

managed to lead successful raids on Babylon. He was captured after Larsa was sacked and died in captivity.

# Conclusion

Upon closer inspection, the situation in the Ancient Near East is not that different to modern-day squabbles for power. The vast variety of different personalities that dominated the area, as well as different cities in general, paints a picture of a complex, politically active, and socially conscious society. Kings and warlords of Sumer were not afraid to use any tactics to their advantage, be it for conquest, maintaining sovereignty, or keeping peace. But all of these periods had their ups and downs, their high and low points, and while most historical details may be lacking or sketchy, we can definitely see the vibrant nature of the Ancient Sumerian cities and their citizens.

Chapter 5

# The Everyday Life of Ancient Sumerians: Jobs and Professions, Travel, Housing, Social Life; Psychological and Ethical Make-up

Sumerians have a grandiose history replete with kings, high priests, heroes, and conquest, as well as failure, laments of disastrous events, and political intrigue. However, an endlessly interesting treasure trove of information arises when you bring up the topic of the everyday lives of the people themselves. We can learn this from numerous tablets with different types of inscriptions, most from two major sources. The first would be the myths and legends that give us a glimpse of what a regular day might look like to a Sumerian civilian. The second source is comprised of more practical documents, such as receipts, almanacs, lists of purchases and trades, accounting documents, dictionaries, and even documents written by beginner students. More on this later.

# Jobs and Professions

An Ancient Sumerian had a vast array of professions to choose from. Again, we should differentiate between two groups. The first includes the Sumerian upper classes and the second includes their "plebs." Depending on how you were born or what you did during your life in Sumer, you could jump between these two groups.

The high-class Sumerians, for the most part, were either priests, scribes, members of royalty, or minor noblemen. We've talked about the priests in a previous chapter, but we shall touch upon them briefly once more. A priest was probably the most coveted profession. From the high priest or priestess to the lower-ranking priests, any one of them would have a high salary, temple land (and even lands beyond), and social respect from among the laity. Naturally, they would receive rigorous education and be skilled in writing, speaking, singing, and numerous other skills. In fact, the first people to practice medicine were from the priestly class.

If you couldn't get into the temple as an Ancient Sumerian, you could always try becoming a scribe, or dubsar in Sumerian. Scribes were highly-regarded, and considering this was the civilization that literally invented writing this phrase is quite the understatement. Knowing how to put cuneiform on clay was a very sought-after skill because you could be employed as an accountant, trader, or any other profession that required lists and calculations. Writing was taught in Sumerian schools, as we will learn later in the text.

Considering that "nobility" is a self-explanatory class, we will focus on the professions of the second group, that of the ordinary Sumerian folk. When we take a cursory look at the topography of Ancient Mesopotamia, we can correctly attest that Sumerians were primarily an agricultural society. An important argument in favor of this claim is the invention of numerous soil-working tools, such as the pickax. Yet another argument is the importance of the many gods dedicated to the harvest. Aside from agriculture, a Sumerian could attain food by herding cattle, raising fowl, hunting, or fishing. Nearly all of this food was, in one way or another, used as tribute to the gods at the temple. An interesting fact is that beer was considered a sacred drink in Ancient Sumer, to the point that it had its own goddess, Ninkasi.

In terms of craftsmen, we find a wide array of professions. There were sculptors, jewelers, lapidaries, carpenters, smiths, leatherworkers, fullers, basket makers, builders, etc. Based on the works of Ancient Sumerian scribes, these were not sought-after professions, and most children—and their parents—with high aspirations were encouraged to pursue academic or theological professions.

Artists also played a huge role in Sumerian society, particularly in sculpture and music. A sculptor made more than mere figures as, according to Sumerian beliefs, statues of deities represented the gods or goddess themselves. Additionally, ancient sculptors made works of art that depicted everyday activities, such as plowing or couples in love. The same could be said of music. Numerous instruments, of different varieties, have been uncovered or described in literature; most were used by the Sumerians in religious services. But, just as is the case with sculpture, not all music was religious in character or by purpose. There were the Nars, or minstrels, who would play an active role in the Sumerian "social scene," singing songs of heroism or revelry at celebrations outside of the temple.

This dichotomy of religious and non-religious application of art was another "first" for the Sumerian civilization, and it's no different with writing. Not all writing was worship-oriented in nature, as earlier Sumerian scholars assumed. Genre-wise, the Sumerian men of letters wrote myths, epic tales, hymns, lamentations, historiographic documentation (in the loosest sense of the word), both long and short essays, precepts, and proverb collections. Out of these, the only ones likely to be written in the temple and specifically for temple purposes were hymns and lamentations.

This is where we should mention one of the most powerful institutions in Ancient Sumer, and another innovation in terms of world history: the Sumerian school or Edubba. From what we can ascertain, the Edubba was largely secular in nature and dealt with teaching practical skills to its students. The teacher, as well as the head-master, was called an Ummia, or school-father. Conversely, the student was called the school-son, the assistant tutor the big brother, and two particular faculty members were called the man in charge of drawing and the man in charge of Sumerian. The school consisted of two primary groups: the first dealt with the

scholarly and "scientific" matters—writing, grammar, Sumerian, mathematics, etc.—and the second with literary and creative matters.

A student of the Edubba would attend it from morning to evening, and the course was rough and often included corporal punishment by caning. It was no easier on the teachers, who had to deal with unruly students for what would today be dubbed minimum wage. This is likely due to the nature of the students themselves. The only children who could afford to attend the Edubba were the offspring of rich parents, and it was freakishly rare for a student to be a girl. An analysis of the behavior of these students and parents actually gives us a pretty good picture of, as the modern proverb states, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." In short, the way the students, the teachers, the parents, the ex-students, and the graduates acted is extremely similar to how they act today in the 21st century. For example, one essay titled "Schooldays," likely written by a graduate, speaks of how he remembers his school days; he is worried that he'll be late and beaten by his teacher, eats his lunch and prepares his homework from the previous school day. Another essay, "The Disputation Between Enkimansi and Girnishag," tells the reader how the teachers dealt with rowdy and unruly students. Furthermore, the third essay dealing with school, "A Scribe and His Perverse Son," speaks of a father telling his son to behave in school and not neglect his studies, pointing out that most other children his age do not have the privilege of education and have to work on the fields or as craftsmen. These essays are written in a less exalted, common speech, making them probably the most honest uncut documents of the time.

# Travel

Though Sumerians are regularly credited for inventing the sailboat and perfecting the first wheel, this is still a rather sparse topic, but an interesting one from a historical standpoint. Most of the transportation vehicles were used for such activities as the construction of temples, with the heavy rocks or bricks being carried by sleds pulled by animals, or for pulling wagons, with either two or four wheels, of various food items. And speaking of two wheels, the Sumerians also had chariots, which were heavy and pulled by onagers, a species similar to a wild ass.

The sailboat was the primary means for going overseas to distant territories for imports and possibly conquest. However, it was not the only type of boat a Sumerian would use. Smaller reed boats covered in skin were also used for transport of material goods. Both the smaller basket-shaped boats and the larger, sea-faring sailboats utilized oars or punting poles.

# Housing

Your house during Sumerian times would be a dead giveaway of your economic status in the city. An average citizen would have a simple mud-brick house one story high, with a few rooms. On the other hand, a member of the higher class would have a two-story house of at least a dozen rooms. The ground floor of this two-story house would consist of a reception room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and quarters for servants and slaves; there have even been private chapels found within these houses. They were well furnished and bore quality dishes and kitchenware. Beneath a two-story Sumerian house you would normally find a family mausoleum, where family members had their final resting place. However, it was also not uncommon to bury your loved ones in a public graveyard.

# Social Life

An Ancient Sumerian, from what we can judge, lived their entire life in the service of the gods. The workdays were hard for any social class, and oftentimes there would be threats of attack from neighboring cities or tribes. But we can conclude that Sumerians weren't averse to entertainment (minstrels and celebrations) or even everyday gossip. The basic unit of the Sumerian society, the family, played an integral, if not the most vital, role in their lives. Family placed higher in importance than friendship or camaraderie. Nevertheless, lifetime friendships were common and well-respected in Sumer, as can be judged by the numerous myths and legends dealing with friendships and companionships of gods and heroes.

Marriage, of course, was an institution that demanded both respect and religious reverence. Normally it was arranged, but it definitely included a romantic element, such as wooing and flirting. These elements are, of course, common to our society today, but they existed well over five millennia ago in the earliest civilization, which is fascinating in its own right.

# Psychological and Ethical Make-up of Ancient Sumerians

Scholarly work on Ancient Sumerians largely focuses on their origins, timelines, religion, politics, social lives, and economic aspects, yet some attention should be brought to their potential ethical and psychological make-up, as this gives us an inside look into the mind of an ancient person.

It is here that we must turn our attention to laws and lawmaking. Sumerians were the first civilization to actually write down their legal codes; these served as the basis for Hammurabi's code, among others. In fact, this commitment to laws stems from Sumerian myths themselves. Enki, the god of wisdom, is credited as coming up with a list of Me's, decrees that go over the laws of every aspect of Sumerian life. These Me's were stolen by Inanna and given to the humans at one point, according to legend. There are at least a hundred Me's, but because of the state of the tablets they were recorded on, we can reasonably discern only some sixty-odd of them. Laws, in general, were so important to the Ancient Sumerian that nearly every ruler of note, such as Urukagina and Ur-Nammu, would start off their recorded self-laudations by noting all the laws they respected and, importantly, how they got their particular city back in order.

Based on this relationship that Sumerians had towards these laws, we can assume that their ethical code wasn't unlike our own. The "black heads" held positive virtues in high regard—they advocated for goodness, truth, law and order, freedom, justice, wisdom and learning, courage, loyalty, mercy and compassion. Naturally, they opposed everything opposite to these. If we look at the social structure of Sumer, we can see these in practice: money and food were distributed to the poor and needy when the time required. Slaves could buy their freedom and were not treated as poorly as slaves in other societies that followed. Schools and the temple were of massive importance and were held in the highest regard by all. In short, the positive traits of human existence earned their prominence and importance in our earliest civilization.

However, there is one arguably negative trait that was also held in high regard by every Sumerian, from the Lugal to the peasant. That trait was superiority over a rival. Without exception, all Sumerian city-states were

vying for supremacy over the others. And this one-upmanship wasn't reserved for the ruler alone—high priests would fight for supremacy in much the same way, as would artisans, students, parents. This was so ingrained in the Sumerian mind that we have stories where animals, plants, and other anthropomorphic objects would engage in many of the same contests as humans.

At long last, we should talk about the Sumerians' relationships with the three principal emotions that govern the human actions—love, hate, and fear. In the shortest form possible, love was an integral part of the human psyche in Ancient Sumer. And by "love" we mean love of all kinds: passionate and physical love between a man and a woman, familial love, love for a friend, love for your country (earliest form of patriotism), and divine love (God to human and human to God). In much the same manner, hate was present in nearly all of these categories as well. A Sumerian who loved Kish would, for instance, hate Lagash. A love for one friend would often lead to hatred of their foe. These examples are numerous. Now fear is an interesting segment, as it almost exclusively revolved around life and living. Ancient Sumerians were obsessed about eternal life; the prospect of dying and ending up in Kur was not a pleasant one, so every Sumerian lived with the express fear of dying somewhere in the back of their mind.

# Conclusion

It never ceases to amaze scholars how similarly the Ancient Sumerians lived and behaved when compared to our society today. In reading their documents you will come across misbehaving and spoiled children, elitist parents, smug and self-centered rulers, obnoxious nobility, disgruntled teachers, and arguments between people that, if uninterrupted, could have continued onward into eternity. Just observing where they lived and what they used for everyday activities, helps us recognize a particular social archetype and, to an extent, all the behavioral traits linked to it. But it's here where we learn of how complex and lively the Sumerian society really was. Here we get the "unabridged," unpolished version of events, and the relatability that is sometimes badly needed to a culture thousands of years behind us.

# Chapter 6
# Sumerian Innovations: Architecture and Technology

Considering their status as the oldest known civilization, it's no wonder that Sumerians pioneered quite a few things, and this is also the case with architecture and technology. In terms of practicality, most tools that are still utilized to this day were first created in Sumer, with some of these creations attributed to gods. These engineering feats revolutionized everyday working life, and some of these we've covered in minor detail in previous chapter. But before we move to these technological firsts, it's important to discuss Sumerian architecture, as it has influenced nearly all other cultures in the region.

# Sumerian Architecture

## Houses

As noted in earlier chapters, everyday Sumerians lived in mud-brick or reed houses. There were no major quarries in Mesopotamia so a typical house would be made of mud or clay, baked in the sun to harden, with wooden doors. These houses were of simple design, many with flat roofs, and the social status of the inhabitant dictated the number of floors; a one-story house would be typical of the lower class and a two-story house of the upper class. In fact, a few rare three-story houses were also found in certain Sumerian cities.

The common design would incorporate a large open courtyard as the center with all of the rooms opening on to it. The only door to the outside would be connected to the street, which effectively shows how deeply the Sumerians valued the distinction between the public and the private life. This house was called an É, and from this term many temple names are derived (E-Abzu or E-Kur, for example; an E-Gal would be the name for the king's temple). A normal house in Sumer would be a little less than a thousand square feet.

## Temples

Early Ubaid temples were of simple, rectangular design. Each of the corners faced one of the four rivers that flowed from the mountains into the four regions of the world; a more practical reason for the temple corners facing that way was using them as a makeshift observatory, apt for timekeeping. It's important to note that these early temples would deteriorate over time, and the new ruler would issue the destruction of the temple and its rebuilding, using only the foundations of the old one. Each newly built temple was more elaborate than the last, and scholars can actually study this progression just by observing some of the more preserved temples of Sumer, such as E-Abzu.

The original temples were simple in design, but new building techniques brought about new architectural additions, like niches, buttresses, semi-columns, and even a few cases of an arch or two. While the original rectangle shape was retained, T-shaped temples emerged in the Early Dynastic Period, with additional chambers and rooms at the side of what

was the main temple. More lavish temples had barracks, gardens, courtyards, basins, and walls. A specific type of temple was the so-called High temple, which would without fail be located on some elevated ground and serve as the meeting point of men and gods.

## Ziggurats

Emerging from the High temple idea, the ziggurats were a uniquely Sumerian invention and can effectively be seen as proto-pyramids. A typical ziggurat would be a terraced structure, with several levels of staircases and platforms built on top of each other. The inside of a ziggurat would normally be just a single space, with no extra rooms. The top of a ziggurat would usually be the temple of a god, hence the reason behind this terraced and staircase design was to bring man closer to the gods.

Ziggurats were made of baked clay and mud and, like the Sumerian house, were one solid structure. Platforms around the stairs would be adorned with plants and trees, as if to symbolize a man-made mountain. Between Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon, a little over twenty-five ziggurats have been uncovered in various forms of deterioration. The importance of the ziggurats was so vast that cultures coming after the Sumerians adopted and adapted them, at times even yielding remarkable results.

*The Great Ziggurat of Ur, circa 2100 BC.*[viii] Original image by Hardnfast taken in 2005.

## Palaces

King's temples, or palaces known as E-Gal, emerged during the Early Dynastic Period, when the king's power would slowly separate from that of the temple. While more of these estates are preserved in younger ancient cultures, such as Assyria and Babylon, there are traces of Sumerian palaces as well. They weren't unlike a regular temple, containing a big courtyard, baths, family mausoleums, chambers for priests and priestesses, and so on. Again, similarly to temples, these palaces were places of religious service, as evidenced by the presence of ceremonial halls and the aforementioned chambers for the priestly class. It's safe to say that an E-gal was the private estate of the ruler in charge of the city, whatever his relation might be with the temple proper, where ceremonies involving Ensis or kings still took place.

## Outdoor Planning and Landscaping

Sumerians were the pioneers of urban planning world-wide, and this is true in both the positive and the negative sense of the word. While a Sumerian would be proud of their city's complex layout, with its fortifications, paved roads, and sections divided into "towns" based on their socioeconomic make-up and purpose within the city, by today's standards the layout was rudimentary and rather unflattering. However, we have evidence of structural planning in the form of maps and written data, giving us a picture of a large-scale organized effort of mapping out what the city should look like. Studying Sumerian real estate transactions written in cuneiform, we can ascertain much about how the building was planned, what the value of land was, and how they dealt with population density issues. If we couple this with what we know from archeological data, it's clear that the irregularities in Sumerian city-building were the result of a mix of planning and organic growth. The planning part is noticeable in the city walls, the district around the high temple, and the main street, as well as the harbor with the main canal. District-wise, there were four types of areas: residential, where the regular people lived; commercial, where there were markets, craftsmen, etc.; civic, where public gatherings took place; and mixed use. The high temple was almost always at the center of each city, and everything revolved around it.

Agricultural land outside of the city would be linked to it via canals and roads. Within the city itself you'd have wide processional streets, public through streets, and blind alleys that were largely private in nature. These changed far more frequently than the public roads over time.

Speaking of outdoor planning, it's important to note landscaping as a major part of Sumerian architectural achievements. Empty spaces and vacant lots were reserved for various projects such as gardens and orchards, and irrigation played a big part in maintaining them. In fact, Sumerian irrigation gave way to the first garden forms, known as Sar in Sumerian. The Sar would measure 144 square cubits and have a perimeter canal for hydration.

# Sumerian Technology

Vast and diverse areas of technology, including transportation, tools, war, hunting, agriculture, and brewing, have their origins in Ancient Sumer. We've briefly touched upon the wheel, the pickax, and the different types of land and water vessels; however, that's but the tip of the iceberg. The Sumerian mind was an active, creative one, and this gave birth to numerous technological innovations. When it comes to basic tools, the pickax was in the best of company, as the Sumerians also invented braces, saws, hammers, chisels, nails, bits, hoes, pins, axes, and knives. Most of these were used by everyday people for construction and repairs. War was another "industry" where Sumerians gave the world a whole host of new tools, including lance points, swords and scabbards, arrowheads and quivers, daggers, and armor. In fact, one type of chariot that came out of Sumer was specifically used for raids, as can be seen depicted on mosaics and reliefs, in statues, and in other works of art. More practical tools were also present, such as water skins, horse harnesses, bags, various clothing, footwear (sandals and boot), glue, fishing harpoons, and rings. In terms of raw materials, Ancient Sumer was the first to utilize bronze and leather while already working with materials such as lapis lazuli, bitumen, clay, alabaster, gold, ivory, silver, and carnelian.

But it's the culture where Sumerian inventions really shined. The cuneiform script is by far the earliest writing system, and it was so influential that it became widespread throughout the Ancient Middle East, and was even in use until around the first century BC, a whole five plus millennia after its invention. Mathematics was a major part of the Sumerian schooling system; they singlehandedly birthed arithmetic and geometry, largely for practical uses like measurement and accountancy. We also need to mention the first use of the lunisolar calendar, later to be implemented in cultures both east and west of Mesopotamia.

Food production wasn't necessarily new with Sumerians, but the biggest invention that facilitated it was irrigation, making the best use of the wet riverlands and producing copious amounts of edible grain and fruits. One particular invention that became a Sumerian staple in all cultural aspects was beer. It was, in fact, so important that workers in Uruk were paid in beer for their services.

# Conclusion

Sumerian architectural and technological prowess gives us a glimpse into how their culture became dominant in the region for several thousands of years. It took ingenuitive minds to rethink the way to build houses, plan out cities, provide food and water, and build defensive structures in times of war. What it also took was imagination and abstract thought because only that type of mind could produce non-material disciplines such as writing and mathematics, and furthermore apply those in real-life situations. Ancient Sumerians survived and flourished by adapting and evolving every step of the way, and in a sense you can draw a parallel between that and their crowning achievement of architecture: the ziggurat. Every new level of success brought them closer to greatness, with the basics still there yet strong enough to handle more innovation. This view contradicts what the mainstream opinion of Ancient Sumer, that their culture was more primitive and religion-oriented, was for many years. Their technological and construction-based breakthroughs give us a more nuanced, complex picture of the first civilization as people of great ideas and great execution.

# Chapter 7
# Sumerian Culture: Literature, Art, Music

With writing comes literature. With crafting comes art. With speech comes music. All of these were well and alive in Ancient Sumer. As noted in earlier chapters, Sumerians did most of their daily things in the service of the gods. However, there was definitely a practical, more mundane, and everyday element to everything they did. In other words, the Sumerians were the first culture to separate art and literature from religion and craft masterpieces purely out of a creative need for expression. In this chapter we will focus on this creative side of Ancient Sumerians and examine these three areas more thoroughly.

# Literature

A culture that invented writing was logically going to utilize it for aesthetic purposes sooner or later. As stated, hymns and lamentations were definitely a part of religious ceremonies, and it's extremely probable that writing developed as a need to pass these down to new generations of believers. Five lamentations were preserved, most dating from the period marking the decline of the Third Dynasty of Ur. They are all city laments: Lament for Ur, Lament for Sumer and Ur, Lament for Nippur, Lament for Eridu, and Lament for Uruk. Out of the hymns, some of the best-preserved ones are the Kesh temple hymn and the Hymn to Enlil.

Most of what Sumerians wrote was poetry, or rather some variation of it. Included are the famous long poems about the gods and three major epic cycles. One of the said cycles contains two legends of Enmerkar, whereas the other contains two tales of Lugalbanda, both prominent kings and heroes of Ancient Sumer. The most famous work, however, is the third epic cycle, which includes five stories about Gilgamesh. Out of all the Sumerian literature, Gilgamesh was by far the most influential worldwide, as it has given birth to the genre of epic poetry. The main hero of this cycle, Gilgamesh the king of Uruk, travels the world and performs impressive deeds with his follower and best friend Enkidu. The epic got a rewrite in Old Babylon, as well as other Ancient Middle-Eastern cultures, making it a true cultural touchstone in world literature even back then.

Other types of literary works would include myths and poems about gods and goddesses, with Inanna having the largest number of works written about her. The most famous includes her descent into the underworld and escape by exchanging her husband Dimuzi for her soul. Throughout these myths, rarely is ever any mortal man shown in a positive role, and mortal women make no appearances. And true to the nature of the ancient gods, the gods in these myths are represented with very much human characteristics—they fight, they bicker, they trick one another, they fail their tasks, get punished, and ultimately get saved. No god was immune to this treatment, not even Enlil, the major deity of the Sumerian pantheon.

Proverbs and essays also existed, usually written in forms of collections. An interesting genre of writing involved discussions between two differing sides, like an ancient form of debate. These did not only occur between two

human beings but also between animals, inanimate objects, concepts, and ideas. The Ancient Greek philosophers will later perfect these in the form of dialogues.

There's abundant evidence that some form of "creative writing" was a part of regular curriculum in the Edubba. Advanced students were made to remember more complex Sumerian texts and reproduce them by heart, both orally and in writing. In time, students, former students, and even teachers wrote their own texts, further contributing to the overall culture of their respective cities.

*The Flood Tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, circa 7th Century BC.*[ix] Original image by Osama Shukir Muhammed Ami.

# Art

An Ancient Sumerian artist would most often be a sculptor. As such, we find plenty of examples of sculptures, reliefs, vases, and various other pottery. However, we also find traces of mosaics and murals, which shows that Sumerians also painted, though not as frequently.

In terms of vases, the Sumerian artist chose a cylindrical vase to represent the Creation of the World, a technique that was soon widespread. A famous example of this would be the Warka vase found in Uruk. This vase was made of alabaster and stands around three feet tall. It was a part of a pair of vases inside of the Temple of Inanna, but the other vase's relief is barely legible due to deterioration. This vase depicts a procession of men taking up agricultural fruits of labor to Inanna, all of this shown in four tiers or registers, moving in a circular continuous fashion from bottom to top.

An interesting piece of art that wasn't originally intended for that purpose is the cylinder seal. It was a small cylindrical object with elements carved on it in reverse. The object would then be rolled onto the clay to form a signature of an official, usually a high priest or a king. These seals have been used since the Ubaid period, and the reason they're so fascinating to Sumerian (and other Ancient Mesopotamian) scholars is because of the detail that went into creating them. The seals would be made of various precious stones, like lapis lazuli, marble, jasper, hematite, chalcedony, agate, steatite, serpentine, and limestone, with gold and silver reserved for the highest of classes.

When it comes to statues, though, a few are noteworthy to mention. Within the temple of the remote city-state of Eshnunna, excavators found twelve statues of mostly men in a praying position, with wide, protruding eyes. The most famous of these was dubbed the Standing Male Worshipper of Tell Asmar (modern-day location where Eshnunna used to be). However, if there ever was a figure of note who contributed most to the art of sculpting, that would be Gudea of Lagash. This ruler commissioned numerous figures of himself, some very lifelike; one particular figurine is of him holding the temple plan, found in Girsu within the Lagash state, which Gudea ruled over. These statues were largely made of diorite and can be as tall as an average human.

While Uruk, Lagash, and Eshnunna provided splendid pieces of art, one that continues to fascinate historians is the so-called Standard of Ur. This small wooden box, with a mosaic of red limestone, lapis lazuli, and shell, is vividly colored and has two "sides" to it, the Peace side and the War side. The War side shows what might be the most accurate depiction available of a Sumerian army during conflict. Consequently, the Peace side shows a banquet, with plentiful food and beverages as well as musicians entertaining guests. It was originally thought to be a standard of some kind, where it got its name, but its true purpose is still unknown.

Other notable works of art include the Warka Mask of Inanna, which we briefly mentioned in one of the earlier chapters, the Limestone bull of Uruk, The Ram in a Thicket, Stele of the Vultures, and the cone mosaic from the Eanna temple. Most of these works are either partially restored or in a slightly decrepit condition, and much like the Warka vase, often came in pairs.

*The Peace Scene, The Standard of Ur, circa 2,500 BC.*[x] Original image by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin.

# Music

We've spoken a bit about the Nar, or the minstrel, and how much of a prominent role he had in spreading awareness of the myths through song. However, musicians in and of themselves were an inseparable part of the Ancient Sumerian temple. Music played a dual role, both as a religious tool and as a form of artistic expression.

There were three types of instruments that the Sumerians would use, divided into three groups: percussion, wind, and string instruments. Within the percussion group there were various drums, timbrels, and rattles. A typical name for a drum in Sumerian was Ub, with Ub-Tur meaning 'little drum,' Su-Ub 'skin drum,' and Ub-Zabar 'bronze drum.' A Balag would be a huge drum reminiscent of a lyre, with the smaller form, Balag-Di, played by largely women. A-la and Su-A-La would be a large drum suspended on a type of pole. Two more drums that are often mentioned in Sumer are Su Gu-Galu and Lilis. In terms of timbrels, there were two major types: the A-Da-Pa and the Me-Ze and its skin variant Su Me-Ze. Rattles' names would normally be very hard to trace, but the ones we know of were called the Katral and the Nig-Kal-Ga.

Flutes, pipes, and horns constituted the wind instruments of Sumer. The Ti-Gi and Imin-E were prominent flute types of this era, with the latter literally being called "the seven-note," pointing to a potential seven-note scaling system. Among the reed pipes we find the Na, the Er-Šem-Ma, and the Kitmu. The second of the three was likely a single pipe used in processions, with the third probably containing a cap of a horn or gourd. A double pipe was called a Šem, with its name being Giš-Har-Har if it were made of wood or reed. More reed instruments included the Pitu, the Dun-Gi Gu, and the Imbubu. Horn-wise, two particular instruments are mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Giš Rim and the Giš E-Ag, likely two parts of the same instrument. A similar type of horn might be the Karan. Typical animal horns had a variety of names: Sim, Si-Im, Si-Mu, Si-Im-Da, Si-Im-Du. All of these instruments worked on largely the same principle as modern-day wind instruments.

It is with the stringed instruments—the harps, lyres, and lutes—that we must turn our attention to probably the best preserved musical tool from Ancient Sumer: the Lyres or Harps of Ur. Three lyres and one harp were

discovered in the city's Royal Cemetery but are all classified as lyres out of convenience. Two of them, the Great Lyre and the Queen's Lyre, are so well ornamented that they're a work of art in and of themselves, displaying golden bull heads with some elements made of mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli. These lyres were called Al-Gar, and a typical Al-Gar would have a different number of strings depending on the model—it could range from six to eight, with the golden standard being eleven. Harps also varied in size and number of strings, and there were numerous types, such as the Zag-Sal or Al, Miritu and Giš-Miritu, Giš-Mi-Ru, Giš-Sabitu, and many others. Regarding the lutes, the Sumerians played the Pan-Tur and the Sa-Li-Ne-Lu (originally thought to be a wind instrument by scholars).

An interesting question is that of notation and scale. It is evident from Sumerian instruments that a scale was definitely present, probably either a pentatonic or heptatonic one, or in other words a scale of either five or seven major notes. This, however, cannot be verified with any major level of accuracy. The same goes for notation. Cuneiform tablets were found that suggest written music; however, it cannot be defined which note each sign would represent, nor how they were classified.

*The silver and golden lyres of Ur, Early Dynastic Period.*[xi] Original image by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin.

# Conclusion

Instead of a summary of every artistic, literary, or musical endeavor, it's noteworthy to point out an important detail when it comes to these disciplines in Ancient Sumer. It is true that a good number of sculpted, written, and musical works had the gods and worship of them as the main theme, as well as purpose. But judging by the abundance of material that illustrates everyday life, we can be all but certain that Sumerians literally pioneered art for art's sake. On various sculptures and vases you will see depictions of field work, tributes, singing and dancing, eating and drinking, fighting, and even resting. Ancient scribes would also touch upon more mundane, regular events from people's lives, while musicians enjoyed playing songs and singing during celebrations outside of the temple grounds. This appreciation for the world around them made Ancient

Sumerians not only the world's first artists but the world's first creators of relatable masterpieces.

# Chapter 8
# Sumerian “Foreign Policy”: Relations with Other Nations

As powerful and as influential as Sumerians might have been, they were far from being the only people group to inhabit Ancient Mesopotamia. During their five plus millennia of existence, they shared the space with various peoples and nations, and there was a varying degree of interaction between them.

# Lands with Unknown or Unconfirmed Locations

Sumerians would often write of lands they considered important for trade, or even noteworthy in myth for one reason or the other. However, modern history cannot point out the locations of these areas with any kind of certainty. The four prominent states that the Sumerians were on good terms with were Aratta, Magan, Meluhha, and Dilmun.

Aratta, at least the one of myth, was a state with numerous good stones and metals, of wise and daring rulers and high priests, and possibly even home to the worship of Inanna. If we take what scant details we can that don't obviously seem legendary or make-believe, we can assume that, had Aratta existed, it would have been heavily influenced by Sumerian culture, from their religious and ruling system to their language and nobility titles. However, despite not knowing the exact location of this city-state, some scientists still speculate where it could have been located, placing it either near the Caspian Sea, modern Iran, or east of it.

Magan is another prominent state whose location remains speculated upon. Most scientists point to Oman as a likely place, with Iran and Pakistan and even Egypt suggested as probable alternatives. Ur and Magan maintained frequent trade, largely one of copper and diorite. As mentioned, the Ancient Sumerian cities didn't have quarries or other sources of solid stone, and the metals they used for tool and art crafting were imported. This import of copper continued until the Gutians took over Ur. When Ur-Nammu reclaimed the city, the trade was reestablished anew.

Meluhha was the other major trade partner of Sumer, usually mentioned together with Magan. Among many things, Meluhha exported carnelian, onions, copper, ivory, and sesame oil. Alongside Magan, they are listed as bringing tributes to both the Sumerian and the Akkadian rulers, this done by way of boats. Unlike Magan's location, the one of Meluhha is far harder to pinpoint. Its people are described in the myths as "black men," so Ethiopia serves as a likely location, but there's not enough direct or even circumstantial evidence to prove this. Another likely candidate would be the Indus Valley civilization, as there is some minor evidence of this culture interacting with those of Asia Minor.

The most “verifiable” of these locations is Dilmun, a region that was most likely situated in modern-day Bahrain and surrounding territory. Dilmun was probably an important trading post for all Near-Eastern cultures, where both imports and exports took place. However, the site might have even been an important religious site, or at least a place of religious significance. The flood myth of Ancient Sumer has their version of Noah, called Ziusudra, settle there for eternity with his wife, making Dilmun a proto-Garden of Eden of sorts. There are no direct archeological findings that confirm this, so this speculation largely comes from how prominent Dilmun is in Sumerian writings. As a region, they traded numerous items with Sumer, including stones, metals, wood, precious metals and pearls, shell and bone inlays, and ivory. It is believed that Dilmun held a monopoly over all trade by the Isin-Larsa period, in the waning years of the Sumerian civilization. While they were influenced by Sumerians, the culture and peoples of Dilmun were most likely Semitic.

# Relations with the Other Peoples

## Gutians and Hurrians

While little is really known of the Gutians as a race or culture, they were bitter foes of the Mesopotamian cultures. They frequently attacked Sumerians in raids, employing hit and run tactics. The prominent Akkadian empire didn't fare well against them either, as one of the Gutian rulers defeated their last emperor and began a short-lived Gutian dynasty over most of what Akkad held under control at the time. However, if what we know from legend is true about the Gutians and their barbaric way of life, we can safely say that their domain heralded an age of decline and decadence in Mesopotamia, a sort of ancient "Dark Ages." Most independent nations came to the forefront in this period, like Lagash, and the Gutians were soon enough defeated and expelled from the region by Uruk's king Utu-Hengal.

As far as Hurrians go, the Sumerians didn't have a particularly pleasant opinion of them. If language is any indication, "hurum" meant "fool" or "boor" in Sumerian, thus labeling an entire people group as such. However, the Hurrians themselves were far from fools. Based on their history, they never had expansive conquests, and their most prominent city was Urkesh near modern Tell Mozan. Within Urkesh they formed their first kingdom and either collaborated or fought with the neighboring Semitic peoples. It would only be later, long after the Sumerians were already gone, that the Hurrians would form other powerful kingdoms, like Mitanni at around 1500 BC or Urartu during the 900s -1000s AD. It was after this that they were defeated and absorbed by the local Armenian population.

## The Semites of Mesopotamia

As important, or non-important, as the non-Semitic people such as the Gutians or the Hurrians were to Sumer, it was the various branches of Semites that interacted with them most frequently, whether in peaceful trade or outright war. Early Elamites and Amorites would often raid Sumerian cities, taking control of cities and establishing powerful kingdoms or empires. Descendants of the Elamites were, in fact, Akkadians, and one of the most prosperous periods in Sumerian as well as Akkadian history was the Sargonic era. The early Semites were heavily influenced by Sumerian

culture and art, but based on the events and changes that took place during Sargon's reign, they were well aware of their ethnic background and were proud of it. Most official documents at the time were written bilingually, both in Sumerian and Akkadian, but the second of the two had dominion and was the official language.

Amorites, on the other hand, were the precursors to Babylonians. It was this Semitic offshoot that ultimately crushed the last vestiges of the Sumerian culture under Hammurabi and his descendants. However, much like the Akkadians, the Babylonians took many mythical, cultural, and artistic cues from Sumer. They wrote in the same script, worshiped some of the same deities, and probably were bilingual themselves considering that the Sumerian language remained in liturgical use long after the last Sumerian was gone.

*Sargon of Akkad, circa 2300 BC*[xii]

# Conclusion

As is the case with modern-day nations, the Sumerians' relationship with their immediate neighbors was a complicated one. There was no shortage of bloody battles, coups, hostile takeovers, hostile liberations, submissions, and destructions. However, nearly all of these groups were influenced by the Sumerians in no small way, and considering how geographically distant they were from the prominent Sumerian city-states, that speaks volumes of just how influential the first civilization of the world really was.

# Sumerians
# Conclusion

This book offers some of the most basic knowledge we have on Ancient Sumerians, alongside a few bits and bobs of interesting nuggets of trivia. However, two things are important to note here.

The first is that the scope of data about Sumer is far greater than this one book can cover. An amazing wealth of findings accumulated from over more than a century of archeological research can be overwhelming to anyone willing to learn more about this fascinating culture and the people who cultivated it. And it is precisely because of this enormous effort by the scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia that we can learn about the oldest civilization on Earth, about their customs, ideas, morals, ethics, behavior during peace and war, about how they went about their everyday lives, what they loved, what they hated, who they feared, who they adored, what they pioneered, what they perfected, who lead them to victories and who was the source of their undoing, about both the mundane and the mythical of the treasure trove of civilizational gold that are the Ancient Sumerians.

The second important thing to note is that while we constantly uncover new and illuminating data about the Sumerians, it's still not enough in the grand scheme of things. Reconstructing a culture even two decades old is an arduous task that involves a lot of research, and a lot of legwork, but doing the same with a culture that spanned several millennia, in a geographical area replete with wars, destruction, reconstruction and ever-shifting climate conditions, is indeed a Herculean task, or Gilgameshan, if we're to stay on the subject. And while Einstein did posit that the only two things that are endless are the universe and human ignorance, thus positing that the overall corpus of human knowledge is small and fragile in comparison, it is the task of our modern civilization to learn as much as we can from our ancestors and trudge onward all the richer for it.

But we're not concluding this book by talking about us. We're concluding it, appropriately, with Sumerians. In a sense, they are more like us than most people care to admit: they had a long and storied history that included both mythological and legendary aspects as well as more secular, down-to-

earth events. They single-handedly created many of the tools, physical as well as educational, which we use to this day, and the ones that were created before them were perfected by them. In addition, they birthed some of the most famous and noteworthy rulers of not just the ancient, but our modern world as well, kings and even queens whose legendary exploits in and of themselves constituted innovations and reinventions. Architectural wonders, institutional foundations, even the early democratic thought—all of these first found their home in Sumer. And, as is inevitable, so did corruption, bickering, wars, destruction, and devastation, all areas that were also all but perfected by the "black heads" of Mesopotamia. But amidst all of that innovation, the Sumerians knew how to appreciate aesthetic beauty, utter a learned, written word, and even have fun once in a while. And while they might have been a thorn in the side of their immediate neighbors and bitter enemies, their culture echoed onward within the selfsame enemies for centuries after they were gone.

Ultimately, that's the best way to end this. The Ancient Sumer is no more, but with all of the things they've done and undone listed in this book, they remain immortalized as the first culture to dare and do what we regularly go through every day. This is all best summed-up by the title Samuel Noah Cramer chose for one of his acclaimed works on the subject—'history begins at Sumer.'

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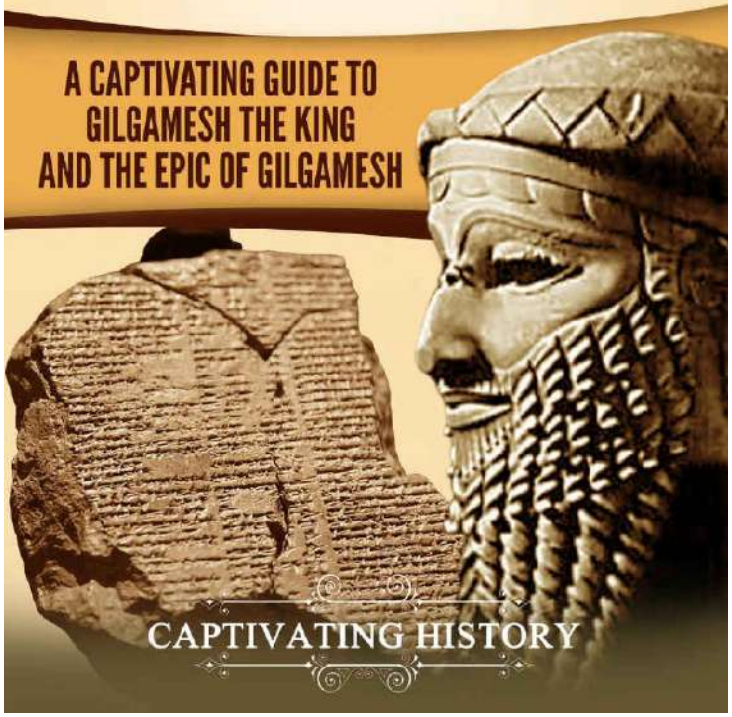
# Part 2: Gilgamesh

## *A Captivating Guide to Gilgamesh the King and the Epic of Gilgamesh*

# GILGAMESH

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO GILGAMESH THE KING AND THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH



CAPTIVATING HISTORY

# Introduction

Rarely does a name survive as many millennia as Gilgamesh has. World-renowned men of letters such as Carl Gustav Jung and Rainer Maria Rilke spoke nothing but the highest praise for the ancient Babylonian epic about the popular and much beloved Sumerian king. Numerous works of literature have been either directly inspired by or openly mimic this epic, all from writers who have nothing but the utmost respect for this treasure written in cuneiform.

But as is often the case with ancient writing, there are still plenty of things left to discover about Gilgamesh and his exploits. The sources that give us the tale are broken, damaged, incomplete, and more often than not contradict each other in crucial places. The story of the king of Uruk was so popular that it went way past its original area of influence, that being the Sumerian city-states. Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, and many other people groups of Ancient Asia Minor saw this hero as worthy of preserving in their own cultural milieus. The stories of his accomplishments were told and retold, taught and learned, and retaught and relearned over and over again. And what's more, the tale of the hero of Uruk wasn't content on just staying active in ancient times. Since its discovery in 1853 and subsequent first translation in the 1870s, it has reached an entirely new, entirely different, audience, one that would see the epic come to life after almost four millennia of utter obscurity. It's impossible to count all of the research that has gone into the epic, and with new fragments being discovered every day, this interest keeps growing.

One has to wonder, how come something so old, so detached from this crazy modern world became so beloved, something which hundreds of researchers and creators worldwide would end up not just liking but being enamored with? It can't have been its historical value—older and more crucial written texts of Ancient Mesopotamia were found and translated for modern audiences both before and after the Epic. It must be something else, then. It must be its contents, or, more particularly, the culture that created it.

Gilgamesh was a stepping stone in world literature, insofar as being the first real literary work that we know of. Indeed, it wasn't the oldest written document, not even the oldest written creative literary piece. But it was the first piece of high art, of high literature, the first true instant classic. And as

such, it has captured the imaginations of literary scholars and critics almost as much as, say, the Homeric epics or the works of William Shakespeare. And speaking of the bard, he is probably the best point of comparison to understand the importance of Gilgamesh. Most (bad) works contain within them stereotypes and non-relatable characters and situations. Only the skilled author can humanize something inherently silly or not to be taken seriously. It is the works of creators whose works stand out and in turn have built the backbone of world culture. With Shakespeare, people often say of his Hamlet—the character, not the play—that he is literature's first modern man. In that regard, Gilgamesh, the hero-king of Uruk, is literature's first man.

In case this last bit confuses you, dear reader, it will be made clear once you've read through the epic itself. But before moving on to the story, it's essential to briefly cover the background of Gilgamesh.

# The History of the Epic

The epic was first discovered in 1853 by the Assyriologist Hormuzd Rassan and a young British traveler Austen Henry Layard in the Library of Assyrian king Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. This version consisted of twelve tablets and was written by the scribe known as Sîn-lēqi-unninni. Because of its relative completeness compared to other sources, this became the so-called "Standard version" of the epic, popularly known by the first ominous sounding verses "He Who Saw the Deep."

Older versions of the epic were found throughout the ancient world, the most famous one of those being "Surpassing All Other Kings." There have been several fragments found as well that contain mere pieces of the story, some even written by student scribes, with wildly different, freer interpretations. Two tablets that make up "Surpassing All Other Kings" are known as the Pennsylvania Tablet and the Yale Tablet, named after the museums they are still housed in. Other fragments also bore either the name of the college or the name of their excavation site, such as the Philadelphia fragment, the Nippur School tablet, the Tell Harmal tablets, the Ishchali tablet, the partial Baghdad tablet, and the tablet reportedly from Sippar. Most of these tablets served as supplementary material in reconstructing the entire epic.

Its first translation came in the 1870s, a few decades after its discovery. The first translator of the epic, George Smith, reportedly recognized the story of

the Great Flood in the cuneiform writings of the epic and was so excited that, immediately after rushing out to tell everyone the good news, he began undressing himself. Before his efforts to translate the epic (later dubbed "The Chaldean Account of the Genesis"), Rassan erroneously translated the god-king's name as "Izdubar." The to-this-day unparalleled translation came from the world-renowned Assyriologist Andrew George in 2003, published by Penguin Books. Still incomplete, this translation gave the researchers a clearer, better scope of the epic and its development.

## Gilgamesh – a Potential Historical Account

If we ignore the epic, or rather just its fantastical elements, we might have a decent idea as to who Gilgamesh was. According to the few scant sources on the man, he was a ruler of Uruk circa 2600 BC. As such, he would have been the contemporary of both Enmebaragesi and his son Aga, or Akka, at the time current rulers of Kish. Kish was the most important city-state at the time, which can be seen from the custom that other rulers took up of naming themselves "king of Kish" whenever they wanted to demonstrate their absolute power. Gilgamesh was, at the time, credited for building the massive walls of Uruk and generally rebuilding the city. If he truly had been a historical figure (and considering that Enmebaragesi himself MIGHT have been, due to some recent discoveries of items and places he built or commissioned), Gilgamesh would have been so beloved and respected that it would have been no surprise that his cult soon followed. Records of his tyranny and of his immediate family and friends (including his divine mother, two sisters, and adoptive brother Enkidu, all of whom play either a prominent role in the epic or a background role in the earlier Sumerian poems) do not exist, or at least contemporary ones, and Lugalbanda, often described as Gilgamesh's father, could have either been his contemporary or even dead long before Gilgamesh was even born. But based on the status of Uruk after his rule, and the subsequent wealth of literature in his name, it's safe to say that he has left a notable mark on both history and culture of Ancient Mesopotamia.

*Tablets inscribed with an Old Babylonian Gilgamesh fragment. Isin-Larsa Period.*[xiii].

# Notes on This Version

The version you're about to read is a prosaic retelling of the epic. The two major sources used for this task are Andrew George's 2003 translation and Stephen Mitchell's poetic adaptation, first published in 2004 by Profile Books Ltd. While Mitchell's admittedly controversial version does offer a

more poetic and readable version of the Epic, more than a few liberties have been taken with some linguistic solutions. George's superb version, on the other hand, offers more than enough wealth of not just translation but extra material that helped place a few things in context that the epic on its own, in its current state, could and would not illustrate.

For the Sumerian poems about Gilgamesh, a combination of George's translation and Samuel Noah Kramer's original notes on them helped with reconstruction and conversion of them into prose. Several additional sources helped in minor ways, providing some context and a few decent interpretations of several key points in the prosaic version in this book. Brief notes are given after the stories so as not to interrupt their narrative flow.

# Tablet 1: The Coming of Enkidu

The first tablet serves as both the prologue and the first scene of the epic. In it, the poet-scribe begins to describe the primary protagonist, i.e., Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk. Gilgamesh is described as a man of great wisdom. He has seen the "country's foundation" and has traveled to numerous places, including even the deepest regions of the known cosmos, like the Great Sea beneath the earth (known as Abzu, or the Abyss). This mighty king is filled with wisdom acquired from his many arduous journeys, trials, and tribulations. He has even uncovered the secret of what the world was like before the great flood, the mighty Deluge that wiped out most of humanity. But the trip was tiring to him, as he returns weary, beat, and willing to find some peace. In such a state, he decides to write all of his endeavors onto clay so that others may look upon them and read them in the years to come, presumably.

Gilgamesh didn't always start as a wise man, but he was always great. Most of his greatness can be seen in his masterpieces, the buildings he commissioned. First off is the great wall of Uruk, the mighty rampart no other city-state has, a mighty sight to behold indeed. It's long, durable, with a mighty parapet that no earthly ruler could possibly copy. And speaking of things others cannot possibly copy, there stands a sacred storehouse dubbed Eanna, also commissioned by the great king we're just now getting to know. Climbing the stairs, we get to the very seat of the goddess Ishtar, the patron deity of mighty Uruk with its many epithets (Uruk-the-Sheepfold, Uruk-Haven), reaching the very heavens. But it is only if you climb the wall and survey the surroundings that you can really get the scope of what Uruk is really like. Both its urban center and its date orchard are a square mile large, as is the clay-pit. Half of that size is the temple to the revered Ishtar alone. Three and a half square miles beyond that is all under Uruk's direct dominion. This is indeed a mighty city, one fit for a king of Gilgamesh's magnitude.

We are then invited to meet this king, how he formed, what he went through, and how he acquired his vast wisdom. And we can learn all of that easily, for within a cedar tablet box lies a clasp of bronze, and within this clasp lies a lid that hides this secret. We only need to pick it up and read

what the great king of Uruk went through, all neatly written on a lapis lazuli tablet.

The early Gilgamesh was, indeed, a wild card. It was impossible to understate his might. His armies followed him everywhere. He was dubbed the wild bull, rampaging on. Many called him a mighty fort protecting his comrades in arms, a violent wave of flood that can crush walls of stone. A perfect being in strength and power, he was the offspring of king Lugalbanda and the goddess Ninsun, adequately dubbed two-thirds god and one-third human.

Gilgamesh of old dug wells, opened passes through mountains, crossed the very oceans to meet the sunrise, restored numerous important buildings that were destroyed during the great deluge, and returned the sacred rites and rituals back to the people for their prosperity. This was indeed a man to be reckoned with, and one not likely to be challenged. He was created by Aruru, the lady of the gods, and his form chiseled to perfection by none other than Enki, or Nudimmud. His entire body was huge, with a thick beard, long thick hair, and a handsomeness unrivaled by any living man.

It was this very Gilgamesh that was strutting the streets of his city and wreaking havoc, like any tyrant completely aware of his position. His army was at his beck and call, with no man willing to challenge him. Other men suffered throughout the city, and fathers are left without sons. But Gilgamesh made sure to have his way with women as well. He took his fill of them, consequently leaving mothers without daughters. Naturally, the people of Uruk could take no more, and so they went straight to Anu, the head deity of the Sumerian (and Akkadian) pantheon. They spoke at length of Gilgamesh, lamented every son killed, every daughter used, every groom left without a bride, warrior left without a wife, people trampled on by this lugal's very might, and the impotence of others to face him. They seek Anu's help, for this wasn't the king they asked for. Oh, he was wise and strong, all right, and he did spectacular deeds for their city, but it was no excuse for tyranny.

Having heard all of these reasonable demands, great Anu tells his creations to seek out Aruru and ask her to fashion yet another man, one that would be Gilgamesh's equal in every way. One, more importantly, that would lead to the splendorous city finally getting some peace. The people of Uruk heeded this advice, and they summoned Aruru for that specific purpose. After hearing them out, the mighty goddess did exactly what was asked of her—

she made another man from scratch. The process seemed simple enough for her. She washed her hands, grabbed some clay, fashioned it into a shape, then tossed it into the wild. And sure enough, a man stood there, breathing in his first breaths. There stood Enkidu.

And Enkidu, in his own way, was impressive. He looked much like the mighty god Ninurta. His massive hair was as long as a woman's, as was his beard, and he wore nothing but rags. This was a wild man, not of any people, nor of any city. Just a wild man who found his next-of-kin in the local wildlife. He ate grass with gazelles, drank water with them, and frolicked about with fish and other beasts. But he won't remain unnoticed for long.

A trapper spots this odd person enjoying himself in the fields and naturally this scared him. In fact, he kept coming back to this field, and kept spotting this wild man, which made him feel uneasy for a good while. When he got the courage, the trapper spoke to his father about his new fascination. He spoke of Enkidu as the mightiest fellow in the land, whose strength is as strong as a meteor. He spoke at length of what this wild man did in the fields and did not fail to mention how frightened he made him. However, the key part that frustrated the trapper was what Enkidu did to his traps. He would refill every hole the young hunter dug up, break every trap, and set any animal free. Fear was one thing, but this was interfering with the hunter's livelihood.

The father recognized the situation as dire, so he advised his son to travel to Uruk and seek out Gilgamesh. One specific instruction he gave him was to find the courtesan Shamhat and get her to seduce Enkidu. The trapper absorbed all of this and headed towards the mighty city. In it, he regaled the king with his stories of the wild man roaming his fields. Gilgamesh, still a king with a hint of wisdom, agreed to the plan the trapper's father suggested. He gave the man permission to take Shamhat, the exalted harlot, with him in order to seduce Enkidu and soothe the not-so-proverbial savage beast.

The plan was simple. As Enkidu fed and drank, Shamhat would make herself visible and remove her clothing, revealing her body ready for copulation. Enkidu would approach her and make love to her until he lost his animalistic tendencies and instincts, becoming more, if not fully, human and scaring off the animals he spent his days with. The trapper and the harlot then depart Uruk and set their plan in motion.

Shamhat knew what she was doing. She disrobed, showing her ample breasts and tender nether-regions. The trapper reminded her not to recoil or struggle, to let Enkidu slowly do his deed and make him humble. And thus she did. The minute wild Enkidu spotted the naked and ready Shamhat, he approached fully erect, and for seven nights and six days they made passionate love.

After finally finishing (some pun intended), Enkidu stood back up, significantly weakened, and all of his animal companions departed from him in fear. He lamented this, of course, but another thing occupied his mind—that thing being the very notion of his mind being occupied by something. Enkidu was now capable of thought, of higher reasoning. He was now no longer merely a wild man. He was a man.

Enkidu returned to Shamhat and lay his head near her feet, observing her. She asked him why he hung out with animals when he could be with her in the splendor of Uruk. Her own description of the city was no less exalted than that of the poet telling us of Gilgamesh and his home. She spoke of well-clad men, of festivals where music was loud and cheerful, of women who were so sensual and shapely they even made the elderly erect. But mostly, she spoke to him of Gilgamesh, potentially the only man who could rival the wild man's strength and agility, the god-king of Uruk whom Enkidu should challenge. Naturally, Shamhat had no shortage of epithets and words of praise for her king. She spoke of his lineage, of how the very highest of gods, like Anu, Enlil, and Ea, bestowed upon him their eternal wisdom, of how strong and durable he was (for what human can stay awake for twenty-four hours straight, every day?!), and of how handsome he was. And indeed, this king that Shamhat spoke of was expecting Enkidu, seeing him in two very similar dreams. Enkidu listened as the exalted whore told him of Gilgamesh's bothered slumber. The great king, as it turned out, went to his mother, the goddess Ninsun, and told her of these dreams. Be it a mighty star of heaven, i.e., a rock or an ax, it fell before the king, yet he could not lift nor move it. Many people stood around him and this object, and in both cases, he picked it up, loved it as a man would love a woman, held it in its arms and thought of it as important, an equal to itself. And both times, the wise Ninsun told him that this would be his equal, his closest friend and companion, and more importantly, his savior. This would be someone who would counsel him and join him on arduous journeys, risking

life and limb for him. And thus, even before they met, the brotherhood of Gilgamesh and Enkidu was formed.

Enkidu listened to all of this. Even before Shamhat the harlot told him this story, he vowed to join her and enter Uruk's walls. He vowed to challenge Gilgamesh. And, more importantly, he vowed to prove himself the strongest man alive. After Shamhat finished her tale, the two made love again, both

ready to depart and see Shamhat's mighty king.

*Possible representation of Gilgamesh, from the Museum of Louvre, France*[xiv]

# Tablet 2: Gilgamesh vs. Enkidu

Enkidu and Shamhat were on their way to Uruk. As they traveled, they took regular breaks to engage in sex that, once again, lasted for several days and several nights. They stopped to rest in a shepherd's camp, and the shepherds gathered around them, specifically to marvel at Enkidu. They compared them, unsurprisingly, to their king Gilgamesh. They praised his height and stature, his strength, his build, and his general poise and gait. They placed food before the couple, more specifically beer and bread. However, Enkidu didn't eat any. He looked around confused, considering he had never before eaten bread nor drank beer. But the exalted whore Shamhat spoke to her lover and convinced him to try some of both, to take the bite of bread and a sip of beer, as they were both essential to man and sacred dishes of the human race. Enkidu listened and had his full of bread, coupling it with no less than seven goblets of beer. Slightly inebriated and joyful, Enkidu started singing and loosened up more. A barber then came over to fix his hair, and clean-shaven, Enkidu was anointed with oil and put on regular, albeit sophisticated, garments. He was now a man in every sense of the word. In his new garb, he picked up a spear and went lion hunting, testing his manliness.

During intercourse with Shamhat, Enkidu spotted a young fellow who was in a rush somewhere. He asked Shamhat to call the fellow over, as he was curious to where the man was going. What the man shares with Enkidu and Shamhat enrages the former wild man. He was about to do some catering to a local wedding, where music, merriment, and dancing will light the very heavens. But the part that enraged Enkidu was the fellow mentioning a specific custom of Uruk. Namely, the bride would not lose her virginity to her bridegroom, but rather to her king, the mighty Gilgamesh. The fellow even stressed that the gods themselves proclaimed this rule and thrust it upon Gilgamesh the very second his umbilical cord was cut. Since his first drawn breath, every woman belonged to Gilgamesh, with no exceptions.

Followed by his harlot Shamhat, Enkidu made his way to Uruk. The minute they reached the town square, people started to crowd around them. Much like in Gilgamesh's dream, they observed the wild man with amazement, bewildered and stunned that someone of his stature just walked into the walled city's square. The city folk, however, were more observant and

detailed in Enkidu's assessment than the shepherds from days ago. They compared him to Gilgamesh somewhat more objectively—Gilgamesh got Enkidu on height, but Enkidu was bonier and sturdier. They accurately concluded that the man before them fed off the milk of wild beasts and grew up in the uplands.

But Uruk was lively even before Enkidu stepped into it. There was a regular sacrifice festival, and merry young men decided to choose a champion for their king to face. The bride was about to take the role of a shrine maiden, a role that Shamhat and her close co-workers held, and she was laid prostrate on the bed meant for the goddess of weddings. This was the moment when Gilgamesh was to practice his rite and take the woman's hymen. However, he didn't even pass the door, as Enkidu blocked his path.

There was no staring-down of the opponent, nor did either of the two men actually think for a second whether or not their opponent could be beaten. Enkidu did not declare to Gilgamesh that he was the strongest man alive, like he boasted to Shamhat. The second he blocked the door of the bedroom with his foot, Gilgamesh grabbed hold of him, and the two started wrestling. The battle at the Uruk town square was fierce. Doors shook, walls trembled, and everyone observed with awe as the two titans went at it. But Gilgamesh ultimately won. He pinned down Enkidu with his knee until the wild man's rage dissipated. He broke off from the fight, now calmer and more collected, and spoke directly to his better. He admitted that Gilgamesh was his better, that he was predestined to rule Uruk and lands around it from the moment his mother, the goddess Ninsun, birthed him and from the moment Enlil made kingship his destiny. However, Enkidu used that very exaltation as an argument for Gilgamesh to drop the rite of taking the bride before the bridegroom. He noted to Gilgamesh that he had everything already, that he was literally blessed by the gods, and that he might just drop this one thing entirely, and possibly opt to do a magnificent feat. Gilgamesh agreed, and the two kissed and embraced, finally becoming friends and compatriots.

Gilgamesh decided to introduce Enkidu to his mother, the goddess Ninsun. She reprimanded Enkidu for attacking her son, and in doing so brought up the fact that Enkidu himself was motherless, and even brotherless. This actually struck Enkidu really hard emotionally, so much, in fact, that he dropped down on his knees and began weeping. Linking hands, his new friend, the king, asked him why he was crying. Enkidu recanted what

Ninsun said, and as a response to that, Gilgamesh proposed the unthinkable—they would slay the mighty beast Humbaba of the Forest of Cedar.

Enkidu was no longer sad, as he was now flabbergasted. Immediately he started to talk Gilgamesh out of facing Humbaba. During his days as a beast, Enkidu saw and heard Humbaba in person. He noted the beast's booming voice, fiery speech, breath of death, hearing that spread for sixty leagues into the forest, and the absolute devotion to protecting the Forest of Cedar. Humbaba, in Enkidu's own words, was second only to Adad, and that none of the lesser gods could challenge the beast. Enlil specifically made Humbaba to protect the forest, and it would stop at nothing to do so.

But Gilgamesh took all of this as an act of fear on behalf of Enkidu. He told his new friend that he himself was the wild man of the uplands, that before he faced Gilgamesh he struck fear into the hearts of men and beasts alike, and that this fear does not befit him. They went to the forge where numerous weapons were crafted for them—axes, hatchets, daggers—all of which were massive in size and gold-plated. Next came the closing up of the city. All seven gates of Uruk were bolted, and Gilgamesh summoned an assembly of both young and old men in order to tell them of his plan. He aimed to cut down the cedar trees in order to bring out Humbaba and defeat him. The young men listened to their king as he openly stated that he was venturing into the unknown, that he was challenging something that literally nobody before him had done. All he was asking was for their blessing, as he would make the trip by himself.

Enkidu, afraid for his new friend's safety, tried to talk sense into the council, both the elders and the veterans of old wars. He restated everything about Humbaba, of his size and might, his ferocity and devotion. The eldest of the men stood up and spoke to the king directly, without much filter. He told Gilgamesh that he was still a young, opportunistic monarch who yearned to prove himself, to empty his excess emotion and energy. In short, the king was not thinking with his head with this decision. Once more Humbaba's strength and ferocity are mentioned, as if to reinstate to Gilgamesh that he had no earthly chance of beating the beast. Gilgamesh merely laughed at this and turned to his friend, at the same time addressing the council, to ask him if he should retire after all of this talk, mock-afraid. The exact response of Gilgamesh to the council—and Enkidu—isn't known, since the tablet where the lines were is lost, but judging from the

actions Gilgamesh was about to take, it's safe to say that they collectively failed to convince him not to go after the beast in the Forest of Cedar.

# Tablet 3: Preparing for the Journey

The elders of Uruk obviously could not convince the great king not to go after Humbaba. Enkidu, his dear friend, couldn't do it either. Accepting their king's decision, the council urged Enkidu to follow his new friend. Considering Enkidu's life in the wild, his skills would come in handy if Gilgamesh needed defending. They instructed the former wild man to go to the front, protect their king, and bring him back home to his many wives. Naturally, they said this to both men, and they agreed. Gilgamesh next suggested that they visit his mother to get her blessing.

Hand in hand, the two friends went to the mighty temple of Ninsun. Gilgamesh was the first to enter, so he approached her and told her everything—of his plan to slay Humbaba, to cut down mighty cedars, and to return to Uruk a famed and powerful man and celebrate the New Year twice as a result of his resounding success with the monster. However, her son, mighty as he was, required her blessing to safely start his arduous journey. He promised her he would come back to see her face, additionally promising to set foot in Uruk safe and sound, as a victor of course.

Ninsun, much like Enkidu, didn't like this piece of news. Sadness overtook the mighty cow goddess, and she retreated into the bathhouse, which she visited seven times in total. First she bathed thoroughly in water mixed with soapwort and tamarisk. Clean and splendorous, she donned a dress befitting a goddess, placed a bejeweled necklace around her neck and onto her chest, and placed her tiara upon her brow. At long last, she was sufficiently ready.

The mighty goddess climbed the staircase of Shamash's ziggurat, reaching his temple at the top. Shortly after, she picked up a censer and lit up some incense. On her knees and with her hands in the air, she spoke to the sun god. As any mother, she pleaded the case for her son. Shamash gave Gilgamesh a restless spirit, one that was now pulling him to go after the mighty beast Humbaba, effectively sticking his head into the unknown. And so, Ninsun had a few requests of Shamash. She asked for Aya, his bride, to follow him on his journey from one end of the earth to the next and remind him that Gilgamesh was in his care now. She spoke highly of Shamash, noting how all of nature sparkled and awoke with his arrival, and how even the exalted Anunnaki awaited for his arrival. She spoke of this, yet still pleaded with him that Aya should, even in those moments of exalting

Shamash, remind him of his task to take care of Gilgamesh. Shamash was asked to make days longer and nights shorter, to make Gilgamesh's step sure and his devotion unrelenting.

During her plea, Ninsun laid out the manner in which Shamash might help her son. Gilgamesh was to be instructed on how to speak to him in dreams, what rituals to pursue during his trip. She next asked for Shamash to assail the mighty ogre Humbaba with all 13 winds known to the Sumerians. Under such distraction, Gilgamesh's swing ought to be hard and true. Upon his aid to Gilgamesh, Shamash was to turn to her, the supplicant, and his mules were to bring him onwards. He would be awaited by a good bed, his divine brothers and sisters would serve him delicious food, and his bride Aya would wipe his face from sweat with her own garments.

Before finishing her plea to Shamash, Ninsun asked him almost rhetorically if Gilgamesh was not fit to join the gods, if her son was not fit to share the heavens, the underworld ocean, and the world itself with the gods whom he derived from. She asked Shamash whether or not her son was suited to grow wise with the ocean-god Ea, or to reign the black-headed people known as the Sumerians with goddess Irnina, or to dwell in the Land-of-no-Return with Ningishzida. Once more, she pleaded with Shamash to keep Gilgamesh safe and to aid him in victory should the need arise.

Ninsun was done with her pleas and descended back down to finish up a few more important tasks. One of these included the mighty wild man, Enkidu. She came to the man and branded him upon his neck. Doing so, she proclaimed to everyone present that Enkidu was now her adopted son. Speaking directly to him, she stated that he wasn't born of her womb but that his friendship with Gilgamesh would become kinship by her decree. She made all priestesses, hierodules, and women of the temple available to her new son, and he was accepted by all as offspring of Ninsun.

Rituals had to be performed during the journey, Ninsun said to the two heroes, but there were rituals that needed to be done right there, in the temple. Due to the damage of the source material, we don't know the full extent of these rituals, nor what they included, but we do have clues. It required being in the chapel, doing something with juniper and incense, and also for some, if not all, temple personnel to be present. Both Enkidu and Gilgamesh were then instructed on what to do every so often during their trip. Most of these would become evident in the following tablet.

Gilgamesh then proceeded to give instructions to his elders and young warriors. He ordered no assembly of officers in the street and for them to perform judicial duties properly until he returned from his quest. Most officers on the street wished good fortunes upon Gilgamesh, kissing his feet and following him closely. They told him not to rely on his brute strength alone but to use his wits and try to beat Humbaba with some strategy. Once more they stressed Enkidu's role and how important he would be to the king. They urged that the wild man went first, as a veteran of the wild and someone who had traversed those parts many times before. At long last, they turned to Enkidu and begged him, yet again, to take care of their king. He was now officially responsible for Gilgamesh's safety. Naturally, even though he knew this would be to no avail, Enkidu once again tried to dissuade his brother from going after Humbaba, but Gilgamesh was having none of it. Giving up on getting him to quit the quest, the wild man instructed Gilgamesh to focus on him, to follow in his footsteps as they moved, for he knew where Humbaba slept. He asked of his brother to send the crowd home, which Gilgamesh did, and the two were now on their way to adventure, possibly going into certain death.

*Terracotta plaque of Humbaba, Louvre, France*[xv]

# Tablet 4: The Journey

Gilgamesh and Enkidu were traveling to Mount Lebanon and the Forest of Cedar. Their steps and movements were impressive when compared to regular humans—they walked 50 leagues per day, and in three days managed to cross 45 days' worth of walking. However, it wasn't just walking. Every 20 leagues, they would pause to have lunch and recuperate, and at every 30 leagues they would set up camp and rest. Every time they would pause, they would dig a little well and place water in it, which Gilgamesh would follow by climbing the nearby hill to ask for a dream so he could see a good sign.

Preparations for the dream would not cease there. Enkidu would build a small encampment every time they paused. He'd affix a strong door at the entrance of the temporary dwelling, so that no bad weather would affect Gilgamesh as he slept. Next, the wild man would make a circle of flour where his new brother lay down to slumber, while he himself would sprawl himself at the doorway. Gilgamesh almost exclusively slept in a seated position, with his head on his knees. One thing that makes him human rather than fully divine was that he slept like everyone else. Sure, he could cross vast swathes of the land in record time, but he too got tired and required rest and food.

Each time they did the ritual, Gilgamesh woke up around midnight and spoke to his brother. He would ask if any gods passed by, whether it was Enkidu that woke him, why he was awoken, frightened, or felt cold. And every time Gilgamesh spoke of his dream, each worse than the last, Enkidu would know how to console his friend. He spoke of what the dreams meant, what represented what, and nearly every time the interpretation was to Gilgamesh's favor. They would do this five times before reaching the Forest of Cedar and facing Humbaba.

Naturally, these dreams were well described by Gilgamesh each time. The first dream was rather simple. Gilgamesh was within a mountain valley he didn't know. One of the mountains within the valley decided to go after the king. It fell on top of the mighty king and crushed him. Gilgamesh, now awoken, was exceptionally confused by this dream. But Enkidu knew how to handle this. He told Gilgamesh that the mountain could not possibly be Humbaba. However, much like that mountain, they would crush the beast

that safeguards the Forest of Cedar. They would cast down his corpse like that mountain was cast down in the king's dream, and Shamash would give them a good sign the following morning.

The second dream of Gilgamesh, unsurprisingly, also included a mountain. In this one, the mountain was a bit more proactive, for it threw the mighty ruler down and held his feet, rendering him unable to move. Gilgamesh had to suffer both being pinned down and an intense brightness emanating from above, which kept getting stronger. However, a man then appeared to the king of Uruk, a man he described as the comeliest, most beautiful man he'd ever seen. This mysterious handsome fellow pulled Gilgamesh out from beneath the menacing mountain, whipped out his waterskin and let the monarch have his fill, calming him down. He also got Gilgamesh back onto his feet, after which the king woke up. Enkidu, naturally, provided Gilgamesh with a positive interpretation of the dream. Again, he stated that Humbaba wasn't really like the mountain, that he was of a different nature. He assured Gilgamesh that they would win, and asked him not to fear the beast but rather to cast aside his fear and proceed with his mission. Due to the lack of data, we do not know who the person with the waterskin was in the dream, but it's more than likely a representation of either Shamash or Lugalbanda, probably the former.

The third dream was an absolute madhouse for Gilgamesh. In this dream, nature itself was exploding with rage. Heavens were howling loudly, and earth was enveloped in massive quakes. Light was slowly giving way to powerful darkness, but this darkness was nothing compared to the massive flash of lightning that followed. Naturally, fire broke out, and the flames were massive, reaching high. Death rained down, Gilgamesh said, and slowly all of that flame was turning into dead ash. Enkidu spoke to his brother again in calming tones, telling him that Humbaba would be beaten soon, and that the fire turning into ash represented this. The dreams being that intense was proof that the two were getting closer to Humbaba and his home, the Forest of Cedar, and thus their battle and eventual triumph over the beast were approaching as well.

The fourth dream was a bit more forthcoming. Gilgamesh spoke of dreaming about a mighty thunderbird. The description was similar to many ancient beasts that would roam about various mythologies of the Old World —it was in the clouds, flying about and menacing the king. Its face was distorted, not making it look like anything he'd ever seen before. Akin to a

dragon, the thunderbird spat fire, and its breath was that of venom. However, there was someone else in that dream besides Gilgamesh and the thunderbird. Another mysterious man made an appearance. He went straight for the thunderbird and utterly beat it. He managed to bind the bird's massive wings and force-land it onto the ground. Doing so, the man took the king by the arm and got him to safety. Enkidu, like with the prior three dreams, knew what this meant. The bird was, obviously, Humbaba, but his power set was now a little more concretely presented (fire, poisonous breath, flight, loud noise). The man who managed to manhandle the beast was now more openly stated as Shamash, the sun god. Enkidu was convinced that the gods had their back when it came to slaying Humbaba, and he relayed this to Gilgamesh—they would be the ones to bind the beast's wings, they would bring it to the ground and lop its head off, bringing it back to Uruk. And they would do so with the full help of the sun god.

The fifth dream had a bit more grounded representation of the situation. Once more Gilgamesh was facing a beast, and once more a mysterious man was saving him. However, the beast this time was a bull, a wild bull at that. It would stomp its hooves onto the ground so hard that the dust clouds formed long columns that supported the sky above. Gilgamesh would have surely lost, but yet another man pulled him out of danger's way and gave him water from his waterskin. Enkidu's response this time was slightly different in terms of explaining what's what. Surprisingly, the bull was not Humbaba, but rather Shamash providing help. The man who provided water for the king during his dream was his father and personal god, former King Lugalbanda. This only confirmed to the wild man that he and his brother would have all the help in the known world to slay Humbaba and grab hold of his precious cedar trees. Five dreams in a row were positive signs, and Enkidu was convinced—Gilgamesh would kill Humbaba and go back to Uruk a legendary man.

The two finally managed to reach the outskirts of the Forest of Cedar. Gilgamesh was getting cold feet and started weeping, which his adoptive brother noticed. He tried to get Gilgamesh to stop crying, drawing attention to his origins and standing within his city. He urged his brother to stand back up and trudge forward, as the slaying of Humbaba awaited.

Before they managed to go, though, they got a message from Shamash. The sun god observed their little heart-to-heart and warned them to hurry.

Humbaba wasn't in his forest yet, but if he entered, beating him would become impossible. The two brothers learned of the beast's seven cloaks that served as shields. Humbaba, at that moment, wore only one, but should he enter the forest, he would don the remaining six. And speaking of the devil, Humbaba bellowed in the distance, the shriek shaking the very heavens in fear. Enkidu felt this fear, turning to Gilgamesh whom he comforted mere seconds ago. The king returned the favor to his brother, telling him not to cower before the mighty beast. He reminded his brother from the wild that they'd trudged through leagues and leagues of land, both flat and mountainous, to reach this place and take advantage of this very moment. He reminded Enkidu further that he had been raised *in* the wild *by* the wild, that he had hunted wild beasts with his bare hands, that his strength was vast and his desire for life undying. They ought to focus on combat and forget death, that was the crux of Gilgamesh's argument. As icing on the cake, the slightly wiser king reminded Enkidu of his task to protect his brother, to take point and go for Humbaba's throat, keeping Gilgamesh safe in the process and bringing them both eternal glory. The brothers then went hand in hand into the forest, ending all talk and preparing for combat.

# Tablet 5: The Battle with Humbaba

The king of Uruk and his wild brother had reached the Forest of Cedar, and it was as glorious as they imagined. The mighty trees were towering over everything, but far more impressive was the fact that they covered the entire mountain. An entire mountain replete with magnificent tree that happened to be the seat of the very gods themselves. And how vast the shades were! So vast and so plentiful that they could keep cool for from morning to evening.

Yet it wasn't just the trees themselves that wowed Gilgamesh and Enkidu. There was a massive path straight through the Forest of Cedar, one of trampled trees and no growth. The men put two and two together quickly—this was made by Humbaba merely walking about his home. The beast cared little for the thorny branches of the cedars, nor their thick canopies. He just went through it like it was nothing. And the track was there to prove it. Gilgamesh and his brother knew of Humbaba's might before this, not to mention that Enkidu actually saw him in the wild a few times. But this was absolute proof that they weren't dealing with a pushover. Humbaba would be quite the challenge for them, thus they unsheathed their axes and daggers and moved further inward.

Near the entrance of Humbaba's lair, Enkidu started getting cold feet. This wouldn't be the first time he had done so even before they ventured into the Forest of Cedar, or even before they made the first step towards their journey. Gilgamesh noticed this, and, as many times before, confronted and comforted his friend. He let Enkidu know that by themselves, they pose no match for Humbaba but that together they could defeat him with no problem. Two climbers could best a tall mountain with a massive slope, he told his wild brother, and a rope of three plies could not be cut or undone easily, and even a mighty lion might be beaten by two cubs rather than one. Enkidu responded to his kingly brother, pointing out that Humbaba was nothing like a mountain waiting to be climbed, nor someone not capable of dispensing with thick rope, nor as weak as a lion might be. No, Humbaba was a powerhouse. He was capable of leveling everything like a mighty storm, and if they didn't turn back that second, he would massacre them right into the dirt. Enkidu again pleaded his brother to abandon his weapons and return to Uruk with his head intact. While the part containing

Gilgamesh's response might be missing, based on the very next event, Enkidu's pleading fell on deaf ears.

Humbaba then appeared, as mighty and terrifying as the legends portrayed him. He spotted the mighty heroes and immediately spoke to them with open hostility. He called Gilgamesh rude and a brute, dubbing him a fool taking counsel with another fool, and vice versa. With Enkidu, he was even more brutally direct. He called the wild man a spawn of a fish, a fatherless hatchling of a turtle and a terrapin that knew not the sweetness of a mother's milk. He spoke of how he used to observe the giant while he was still roaming in the wild and hanging out with animals, opting not to eat him because he would have not sated the mighty beast's hunger. He reprimanded Enkidu for bringing Gilgamesh to his home, acting like a stranger before Humbaba despite being in his dominion lo those many months ago. The beast ended his rant by promising to split Gilgamesh's throat open and spill his blood, feeding his husk to the vultures and other feathery scavengers.

Gilgamesh, a paragon of firmness moments ago, now stood back in fear from these words. He saw Humbaba for the mighty beast that he was and turned to his friend Enkidu to express his newfound fear. He noted that, despite their efforts to come here and slay Humbaba, his heart trembled and his body could not move. He was now where Enkidu stood a little while ago, which only meant that Enkidu, sworn to protect his brother and king, had to assume the role of counselor and convince the king back into fighting. He asked Gilgamesh, not without irritation, why he acted like a coward all of a sudden. Noting that his cowardice would affect the wild man, Enkidu spoke further that the zero hour was there, that the molten copper was already poured into the mold, that the hour was nigh for them to strike. He encouraged the king to strike hard and sure right then and there to finally rid the Forest of Cedar of its protector, the mighty beast standing before them.

Gilgamesh's silent acceptance of this was evident in what happened next. A few blows on the ground from either of the three, as well as their charges at one another, made the earth tear itself asunder. Both Mount Sirion and Mount Lebanon cracked under the fury. A giant, black and ominous storm cloud formed, and rain came pouring down onto the three magnificent beings duking it out. So thick was the rain that it felt like mist almost. But another actor would join the battle soon—Shamash, the sun god, fulfilled

his end of the bargain and sent the mighty 13 winds onto Humbaba. This blinded the beast, and he was unable to progress further forward nor backward. Gilgamesh saw his chance and took a swing at the beast, felling him, but not killing him.

With the king's weapon at his throat, Humbaba was now begging for mercy. He spoke of the king's youth, that he was indeed the offspring of Ninsun and that he indeed managed to flatten the very mountains with his actions, beating even the mighty Humbaba there and then. The beast begged Gilgamesh to spare his life, offering vassalage to the ruler of Uruk. He was to remain in the Forest of Cedar and rule in Gilgamesh's stead. Whenever he wanted to, Gilgamesh could have his fill of the cedars, as they would now be the sole property of the king, which might be used as timber or building material, or really in any other way the ruler of Uruk saw fit.

But Enkidu was having none of this. He urged Gilgamesh to slay Humbaba and return to Uruk a hero. Humbaba's begging, he maintained, was not to be taken seriously and was best left ignored. Humbaba then spoke to the wild man directly. Bitter, he spoke of how he should have murdered Gilgamesh's new brother while they were both still in the wild, while he was still beyond possessing human reasoning skills, while he was, in the words of the forest keeper himself, merely a sapling and not a grown tree. He begged for Enkidu to plead Humbaba's case and leave him be. But again, Enkidu spoke against this. He noted to Gilgamesh that, should the gods like Enlil of Nippur or Shamash of Larsa learn what they did (i.e., sparing the life of Humbaba), they would go after them relentlessly. Humbaba asked Enkidu yet again to reconsider, citing his loyalty to the king, his position in the hierarchy of Uruk, likening him to a shepherd. But Enkidu stayed firm. He reinstated to Gilgamesh the point of the gods' vengeance and that the best course of action was to slay Humbaba and return to Uruk a hero. Desperate, but ferocious nonetheless, Humbaba cursed the brothers, begging for the gods of fate that the two never reached old age together, that Enkidu would die first and end up unburied. To Enkidu, but also to Gilgamesh, this curse was the tipping point, and they returned the insult in the most appropriate way for that situation. Gilgamesh pulled out one of his weapons and struck Humbaba directly at the throat. Enkidu mentioned seeking out the remaining auras of protection later, urging Gilgamesh to strike again, to make a definite finishing blow. With his ax, Gilgamesh again struck Humbaba at the throat, which was enough to

finally put the beast to rest. Humbaba fell to the earth, and the earth shook. His shriek of death alone shook the very peaks of Mounts Sirion and Lebanon, as did other smaller mounts and hillocks nearby. His blood filled the nearby rivers and streams. They tore the beast open, took out his intestines, removed his tusks, and finally cut off his head. Rain and other precipitations fell onto the three figures as the two living ones, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, moved onward to fell a few mighty cedar trees, slaying and picking up some of the auras in the process.

When they cut down an especially large cedar tree, Enkidu spoke to his brother of how he planned to use this tree to make a massive door. This door would be huge, six rods high, two rods wide, one cubit thick, and entirely made from one piece of solid lumber. He planned to place this door at Nippur, at the temple of Enlil, the very god who placed Humbaba in the Forest of Cedar with the task to guard it. That way, the mighty god would marvel at their success and enjoy an appropriate tribute. Gathering as many cedar trunks as they could, they built a raft and placed the lumber on it, preparing to go back to Uruk. Enkidu, as per his promise to the elders of Uruk, was at the helm, leading the way back, whereas Gilgamesh was at the back. Humbaba's severed head was in his hands; he was victorious.

*Statuette of Ishtar clutching her breasts from Susa, c. 1300 – c. 1100 BC*[xvi]

# Tablet 6: Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven

Gilgamesh and Enkidu returned to Uruk after their monumental victory over Humbaba and felling of most of the flora within the Forest of Cedar. When he found himself with a moment of privacy, the king ogre-slayer started washing his hair and then proceeded to undress himself. He washed and cleaned both his body and hair, as well as his weaponry and equipment. Moments later, he flung back his long hair and started decking himself in royal garb. A few cloaks, a goodly sash, and finally a crown—indeed a kingly presence in all of his glory.

Just how kingly and spectacular Gilgamesh looked was proven by way of a goddess. The mighty, beautiful Ishtar observed the king below as he washed and dressed himself, and her body began craving his. She descended upon the earth and spoke to the mighty hero directly. Wasting no time, she asked him to be her groom, to marry her, and become her consort, granting her his fruits. As a wife, Ishtar would bestow upon Gilgamesh numerous gifts, both material and societal. He would get a massive chariot comprised of gold and lapis lazuli, with golden wheels and amber horns. The chariot would be driven by spectacular beasts such as lions and giant mules, and they would bring them to their cedar-scented palace every day. Both the doors and the footstool would kiss his kingly feet, and every other ruler, courtier, and noble would bow to him, the ruler over all. He would receive produce of them as tribute on a daily basis.

Yet that was not all. Ishtar also promised Gilgamesh goats that would bear triplets, sheep that would bear twins, donkeys that would outrun even the fastest of horses, horses that outspeed even them, and oxen that would outweigh other oxen and plow the land better than any.

Yet, Gilgamesh was not impressed. What followed was one of his longest speeches up to this point, and one of the longest rejections in the ancient world. He asked her a set of pertinent questions. Where would she get him his clothing, and how would she take care of his body? Would he really be eating food fit for gods and drink ale fit for kings? He then proceeded to compare the mighty goddess to an entire litany of aristocratic insults. To him, Ishtar was frost that would harden no ice, a massive door that didn’t keep the house occupants warm nor cold when needed, a palace where warriors would meet their end, an elephant trampling its riders, bitumen that

would leave ugly marks onto the hands of the user, waterskin that would injure a thirsty fellow, limestone that would weaken rather than reinforce a wall, a battering ram that levels walls of enemy palaces, and at long last, a shoe that would bite the foot of the man who purchased it and put it on.

He wondered what warrior, in his right mind, would even chance to become the consort of Ishtar, based on her reputation. And it was indeed a reputation to behold, which Gilgamesh made clear and blunt from the very next few lines onward. He listed Ishtar's former lovers in chronological (and gradational, by way of magnitude) order. He mentioned Ishtar's now legendary lover Dumuzi. The two were so in love that an entire custom existed involving their love and marriage. However, Ishtar merely had to change her mind, and poor Dumuzi wound up in the underworld. Her next lover was a bird, a speckled allallu. It too was of great importance to the goddess…until it wasn't. She broke its wings and struck it down, where it still lied, crying "My wing! Oh, my wing!" A powerful lion was her third lover, far more powerful and beautiful than the bird. It too was a great love to Ishtar, yet at one point she dug up seven plus seven pits, which is where the mighty lion wound up abandoned. Her fourth lover of remorse was a horse, of course he too gave an answer she didn't endorse. Thus he was made to drag chariots, endure whips, spurs, lashes, and gallops of seven leagues. He had to drink muddied water, and his mother Silili was forced to perpetually cry. The fifth lover of Ishtar was a shepherd, a simple shepherd that gave the vain goddess freshly baked bread and freshly sacrificed lambs. All of this on a daily basis, mind. Yet Ishtar was not amused, and the shepherd became his own worst enemy, a wolf. As such, he was never again able to approach his herds—shepherd boys would beat and force him away, and sheepdogs bite into his hide. The sixth and, thus far, final lover was Ishullanu, the gardener of her divine father Anu. He would bring her dates every day, loading her table with fruits of his labor. Her loins spoke for her back then, and she asked, in no uncertain terms, to taste his penis and for him to touch her sensitive clitoris. Yet Ishullanu, unlike others, tried rejecting her. He reprimanded the goddess in terms of food and upkeep—the poor gardener knew that being Ishtar's lover meant eating bread baked with insults and slander and sleeping in the winter barely covered. Ishtar, vain as she was, turned the gardener into a toad, unable to perform his duties. Gilgamesh was no fool—he would not become Ishtar's seventh statistic.

Needless to say, Ishtar wasn't precisely calm and collected about this. Her rage and fury propelled her full-force to the heavens, where she spoke to her father, the mighty Anu, and her mother Antu. She cried crocodile tears, moaning about how Gilgamesh scorned her, insulted her, and made her feel pathetic, despite her obvious infatuation with him. Anu, well aware of his daughter's exploits, asked her if she hadn't done something to cause this reaction from the demigod king. Ishtar's following reaction more or less answered the question to both Anu and the reader of the epic—she wanted the Bull of Heaven so she could take him down into the world of the black-headed men and trample Gilgamesh until nothing remained. If her father failed to comply, Ishtar vowed to smash the gates of the underworld, allowing all the dead to go back among the living, outnumber them, and generally raise a whole lot of hell. Yet Anu was unrelenting. He stated that the people of Uruk first had to gather chaff and hay that would sustain them for seven years, for the Bull's descent would ruin their crops and leave them to die of hunger. Ishtar maintained that she had already done so, and at long last, her father gave her the Bull, which she took by the rope attached to its nose-ring and got down among the Sumerians.

The Bull was a massive, magnificent beast, maybe even more so than Humbaba. Its walking alone made reed-beds, marshes, and woods dry up. As it crossed the land by the river, the water went away by as much as seven cubits. Its snorts proved particularly dangerous—the first cracked the soil open, killing a hundred men. The second took down two hundred more. Finally, the third managed to only get Enkidu up to his waist. But Enkidu was not like ordinary men. He leaped up and grabbed the mighty animal by its horns. The bull spat into the face of Enkidu and whipped him with its tail, proving itself quite the challenge for the former wild man. Enkidu's brother was close by, and thus the wild warrior spoke to him. He told him that he managed to discern how powerful this beast actually was and had thus concocted a plan to beat him. Enkidu's plan was as simple as it was deadly—he got behind the Bull, grabbed its tail, and placed his foot onto the upper thigh of the animal. Gilgamesh, not wasting a second, whipped out a dagger and rammed it into the neck of the mighty Bull, holding it by the horns. The Bull fell down dead, ending Ishtar's scheme, yet the warriors were still not done with it. They slashed it open, pulled out its heart, and offered it as a sacrifice to Shamash, the sun god. Upon doing that, they sat down, observing the dead animal before them and enjoying their triumph.

Ishtar was livid. Sitting on the mighty wall of Uruk, she wept and wailed about how her never-beloved and his adoptive brother killed the mighty Bull of Heaven. Enkidu heard this and decided to mock the goddess, tearing out the leg of the Bull and hurling it at her. In no uncertain terms, he told the goddess that her own thigh would end up like that had he attacked her instead, that he would have draped her arms in the Bull's intestines. Beaten, Ishtar assembled her courtesans, whores, and harlots, and they started performing a mourning ritual for the Bull's thigh.

Gilgamesh, on the other hand, decided to milk this situation further. He summoned every single smith and craftsman that Uruk had to offer, and they all looked at the dead animal in awe, specifically at its massive horns. They were thick, amazingly big, made entirely of lapis lazuli, and could hold vast quantities of oil. As such, the king lopped them off and took them to the chamber of his late father Lugalbanda. The chamber needed a place to hold the anointment oil, and these horns were of perfect size to do so.

Battle time was done, celebration time was to follow. After washing their bloodied hands in the mighty river Euphrates, Gilgamesh and Enkidu went to the city and decided to strut for the public. Gilgamesh, reaching his palace, spoke loudly to his serving girls. He asked them, rhetorically of course, who the mightiest and the handsomest heroes were. Naturally, he replied that it was him and his brother-in-arms Enkidu, itself a reason enough to hold a banquet. Upon the massive celebration, the two went to sleep, resting the battle day away. Yet, something was off. Enkidu was having a particular dream, which evidently affected him greatly. He got up from his bed and decided to relay the information of his dream to his brother, visibly concerned.

*Cylinder Seal with Enkidu Vanquishing the Bull of Heaven, c.1970 – c.1670 BC*[xvii].

# Tablet 7: The Death of Enkidu

Enkidu was shaken, on the verge of tears. Speaking to Gilgamesh, he started relaying his dream. In it, he saw the gods of Sumer counsel. The mighty Anu, Enlil, Ea, and Shamash discussed the deeds of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. They touched upon their successes in killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, and ultimately Anu decreed that one of them must die. Enlil specifically asked for Enkidu's death and that Gilgamesh should stay alive. Shamash reprimanded him, noting that Enlil himself decreed that they kill the two behemoths. Not one to be outdone, Enlil reprimanded Shamash for helping them every step of the way. But all of that was more or less irrelevant to the awoken Enkidu, who began to sob uncontrollably. He was to die, the gods themselves decreed it.

After weeping and bewailing the fact that he would no longer go on adventures with his beloved brother Gilgamesh, a delirious Enkidu began his tirade. He talked directly to the mighty door of cedar he crafted in Enlil's honor. He talked to the door as if the door had the capability to respond. Angered or, more accurately, desperate, he spoke of the magnificence of this object, from the cedar it was made of (its glorious size and girth when compared to the other magnificent trunks of the Forest of Cedar) all the way down to the stupendous door the lumber ended up being. He spoke of how he cut the trunk down, sanded it down to a door, and hung it over in Nippur. Teary-eyed, he stated that, had he known that making that door would bring him to this point, the point of dying by divine decree, he would have cut it down and used it as a raft to travel to Shamash's temple of Ebabbara. He would have placed the door not at Nippur, but at Shamash's temple, with a thunderbird and a giant bull defending the entrance. He would have paid tribute in this way to Shamash, who helped him far more than the divine patron of Nippur, where the accursed door wound up.

Enraged, he cut down the door and ripped it apart. Gilgamesh understood the pain of his friend, and, with tears in his eyes, tried to comfort him. He asked Enkidu why he behaved in such a profane, unbecoming manner. He tried to reinterpret his brother's dream, stating that these bad dreams only went to the healthy, strong minds which would survive the misgivings of the world. He further stated that, if there indeed was danger, he would plead

with the gods for Enkidu's wellbeing. He would talk to Shamash, Anu. Enlil, and Ea and beg them for Enkidu's safety. He would then go on to build a golden statue whose splendor would be rivaled by none other.

Enkidu urged his brother not to waste his wealth. Enlil's decision was law, and Enkidu's fate was thus set. He surprisingly soberly stated that his illness was one every human ever would face at one point. There was no cure for death. But this sudden impact of sobriety went out quickly, as Enkidu proceeded to beg Shamash for his life, which he followed by very salacious, very powerful, very jarring curses. At first he cursed the young trapper who found him, the one that would have brought Shamhat to him later. He cursed him in a very specific manner—the poor trapper was to never excel in his trade, to never earn a dime, save up enough money, or hunt enough to feed himself, ending with a wish that the hunter's home remain empty and hollow, devoid of even a patron god.

His next victim of a severe curse was none other than his beloved exalted whore, Shamhat. Her curse was far longer and more detailed. She was to never form a family of her own, to be outdone by younger women, to have her garb defiled, drunkards vomit on her, beautiful things never be in her possession, to never have a decent meal in her house, to sleep on a bed that would barely work as a bench, to end up on the street, asleep on an empty field, dwell in the shadow of a great wall, damage her beautiful skin on the shrubbery and rocks of nature, to be violently struck by drunk men and sober alike, to have a house whose roof would turn to ruin overnight, to have a bedroom where an owl would roost, and for her table to never have food on it. To this enraged Enkidu, Shamhat was guilty of taking his wild-man innocence, sleeping with him and bringing him to the world of the civilized men. To this enraged Enkidu. Shamhat made him weak.

Shamash, of course, was listening intently to this vitriol on Enkidu's part. He spoke back to the former wild man and, first and foremost, asked him why he cursed Shamhat so much. He reminded him that it was Shamhat who gave him bread and beer, who clothed him like a king and connected him with his brother Gilgamesh. He proceeds to tell Enkidu of what the king of Uruk would do for him. Gilgamesh was to lay out a spectacular funeral bed for Enkidu, to lay the dying giant onto it, while he himself would stand to the right of Enkidu. Kings and rulers of the underworld would kiss the feet of the former wild man, people of Uruk would lament him, and not just the regular folk—rich men would mourn for Gilgamesh's

brother just as well. Next, Shamash mentions how the king of Uruk would act after Enkidu left the world of the living. The king would have matted, dirty, unkempt hair, he would don the skin of a lion and wander the wilderness seeking eternal life, bewailing his fallen brother all the way.

Enkidu heard all this, and his rage subsided somewhat. He mentioned Shamhat again, deciding to change her curse into a blessing. She would entice noblemen and wealthy fellows as far as two miles away. She would receive plenty of gifts made of jewels, gold, silver, and lapis lazuli for her skill and beauty. She would eventually make a wonderful wife to a man of good renown, thanks to Ishtar's blessing. In fact, a man that fathered seven children would leave his family just to be with Shamhat.

Enkidu fell asleep again, but that only led to a worse dream, which he spoke of to his brother. In that dream, the earth and the heavens echoed due to a massive storm. He saw a man who looked like a thunderbird, with lion's paws and eagle's talons. The man wrestled Enkidu and overpowered him every step of the way. Whenever Enkidu struck back, his punches would bounce back and end up as ineffective. He would then be turned into a dove, which the man would beat even more easily. The man bound the wings of Enkidu-the-Dove and brought him to the underworld, Irkalla, the path, Enkidu stated, which offered no return to anyone. He was in a house that allowed no light to enter, where everyone ate clay and dirt, where folks wore feathers instead of clothing, and only lived in darkness. He entered a House of Dust, so called because of the many coats of dust upon it, both outside and inside. Anu and Enlil sat at the table to eat, and, much to Enkidu's surprise, all past kings, royals, priests, and men of renown served them like waiters. Next to Anu and Enlil sat other gods and goddesses. There were Etana and Shakkan, as well as the goddess who ruled the underworld, the mighty Ereshkigal. She was joined by her scribe, Belet-seri, reading stuff to her off of his tablet. Before the original tablet with Enkidu's description of the underworld breaks with a massive chunk missing, we learn that Ereshkigal spotted the wild man and asked, surprised, to everyone who was it that sent the poor sod to her.

Gilgamesh accepted the fate of Enkidu from listening to this dream. Since that event, Enkidu grew worse and worse. His body slowly gave way to weakness and illness. For twelve days, the mighty Enkidu struggled, and on that tenth day, he summoned his brother. When Gilgamesh came, Enkidu spoke to him about how he feared death, especially a cowardly death such

as this one. He wanted to fall in battle, preferably fighting next to his adoptive brother, the king. But this fate had him bound to the bed, and unlike the king, Enkidu would die a death fit for a weakling. He, of course, spoke far more of this, but sadly the thirty or so lines that make up this speech are currently lost to Sumerologists. However, the outcome is pretty evident—Enkidu died.

# Tablet 8: Enkidu's Funeral

Gilgamesh mourned his deceased brother early in the morning. He spoke his premature eulogy detailing Enkidu's short, yet eventful life. He spoke of how the wild donkey and the gazelle raised Enkidu as a father and a mother, how he drank the milk from wild asses rather than of a human mother, how he grazed the grass and ran across the fields with the other wild beasts of the pastures and the forests. He urged the Forest of Cedar to mourn the fallen wild man, the same Forest the two infiltrated, partially deforested and devoid of its guardian. The king then urged the elders of Uruk to mourn the wild man, the same elders who begged the two not to go after Humbaba, the same elders who bestowed wardship upon Enkidu, who placed upon him the task of protecting Gilgamesh during their travels. The mourning monarch further begged the crowds of Uruk to mourn Enkidu alongside him, the same crowds that first saw Enkidu as Gilgamesh's equal during their first meeting and first fight. He further begged the mountains, the hills, the pastures, the many trees they felled together, the many beasts he himself hunted like the hyena, the panther, the cheetah, the stag, the jackal, the lion, the wild bull, the deer, the ibex, both the sacred river Ulay and the pure river Euphrates—all of them he begged to weep for the adopted brother of his who lay prostrate and dead before him right there. He urged the young men of Uruk to join the mourning, the same men who saw the two slay the Bull of Heaven and irritate Ishtar. Shepherds and shepherd boys, brewers, plowmen, all of whom helped civilize Enkidu—all of them Gilgamesh mentioned in his solitude, pleading them to mourn his brother. He pleaded Shamhat too, and other harlots and well-dressed men, to mourn Enkidu. Indeed, in his solitude with the deceased wild man, Gilgamesh supplicated the entire known world to mourn Enkidu, and he would of course join them, mourning the loudest, and the most painfully.

And how painfully would Gilgamesh weep! He likened himself to a wailing woman who lost her progeny. For the world had robbed the mighty king of Uruk of his brother, the ax at his thigh, the dirk at his belt, the shield before his face, the festive garb he wore, the girdle that held said garb together—all of these and more were equivalent in importance to Enkidu. But his comparisons of Enkidu to glorious items did not stop there. He called this dead wild brother a wild ass on the run, a donkey of the highlands, a

panther roaming the wild. Yet again he mentioned the two slaying the mighty Humbaba and obliterating the Bull of Heaven, reminding both himself and his passed-on brother of what the two were capable of together. In one desperate act of denial, he shouted at the dead Enkidu's face, trying to wake him up, feigning ignorance of his friend not being able to open his eyes ever again.

A shroud of death now covered Enkidu's face. After doing so, Gilgamesh began pacing around the deathbed, mimicking the wild animals and birds of prey who either circle their potential food or bemoan the loss of their progeny. Pacing gave way to rage, and the mighty king of Uruk tore off his hair and his clothing, looking not unlike a beggar or a madman. This insanity kept its hold of him until the next dawn, when he finally went out and summoned his countrymen. He called for blacksmiths, lapidaries, coppersmiths, goldsmiths, jewelers, and other craftsmen. He issued them a statue of Enkidu, with parts made of gold, lapis lazuli, etc. He ordered for the statue to be placed on the seat of repose, for all rulers of this world and the next to kiss the feet of the fallen hero. He again turned to his dead friend, promising him the mourning of his entire nation, and a self-imposed wandering for himself, with matted hair and animal hide replacing his kingly garb.

Entering his massive treasury, Gilgamesh surveyed his riches, be they made of obsidian, lapis lazuli, carnelian, alabaster, gold, silver, gems, or of any other material of worth. The list of what Gilgamesh bestowed upon his dead brother is, sadly, very damaged in the original texts, but the items he did provide include gold, ivory, carnelian, iron, food consisting of oxen and sheep meat—and all of this in enormous amounts. The king then proceeded to provide offerings to individual gods. Ishtar, the goddess he rejected not long ago, received a throwstick of gleaming wood. Namra-sit, or Nanna-Sin, the moon god and father of Shamash, received a gift which sadly got lost with the damage of the original tablets. The underworld's goddess Ereshkigal received a lapis lazuli flask. Dumuzi the Shepherd, the lover of Ishtar, got a flute of carnelian. Namtar, the vizier of the underworld, received a chair of lapis lazuli. Another gift we don't know about due to tablet damage goes to Hushbisha, the stewardess of the Netherworld. Ereshkigal's sweeper, Qassu-tabat, received a few gifts, among which are a silver clasp and a bracelet of a certain metal. Ninshuluhha, the goddess cleaner of the house, received an item of alabaster that was inlaid with lapis

lazuli and carnelian and depicted an image of the Forest of Cedar. Netherworld's butcher, the god Bibbu, received a double-edged dagger that has a hilt of lapis lazuli and an engraved image of the mighty river Euphrates. The goddess Dumuzi-abzu, the so-called scapegoat of the Netherworld, in this epic presented as a man with the same name as the other Dumuzi, received an item with a back made of alabaster. Finally, an unnamed god received what was probably a box with a lapis lazuli lid and an inner construction of carnelian. All of these gifts, though meant for the gods both named and unnamed, were displayed before the Sun God Shamash, and all of them had one simple supplication—Gilgamesh pleaded for Enkidu to be welcomed by the gods in the underworld, to walk by their side and not become sick at heart.

After a certain succession of events not known to us due to the tablet damage, but which included someone talking to Gilgamesh about the Anunnaki and Gilgamesh contemplating placing a dam on some unspecific river, the king of Uruk was again met with the first rays of dawn, upon which he busied himself with more work about his deceased brother. He opened the gates of his city, then brought about a massive table and placed food and beverages upon it. These included carnelian dishes with honey and lapis lazuli dishes of ghee. He followed this up by decorating the table richly, all for the Sun God Shamash. Sadly, the rest of the funeral remains unknown to the modern reader, as the lines that round up the scenes are yet to be found.

*Ruins of Temple of Innana*[xviii]

# Tablet 9: Gilgamesh's Wanderings

After burying his friend, Gilgamesh kept his word and went out into the wild. He began lamenting Enkidu's death once again. But this speech he made to himself went one step beyond lamenting Enkidu. Here Gilgamesh, for the first time, expressed his almost paranoid fear of death itself.

His solution was to seek out the legendary Utanapishtim, son of Ubar-Tutu and one of the earlier kings of Sumer. This man, also known as Ziusudra and Atra-Hasis, had somehow managed to obtain eternal life and break bread with the very gods. Yet Gilgamesh knew that Utanapishtim was born a mere mortal, like everyone else in the realm of humans. Therefore, he must have done something to gain life everlasting, as well as the favor of the gods.

The problem was that Utanapishtim lived exceptionally far away from everyone, somewhere deep and dark, where even Shamash did not travel. With that in mind, Gilgamesh went on a long, arduous journey. When he came to a mountain pass, as he lamented to himself, he spotted lions and fear overtook him. But he soon overtook that very fear and prayed to Nanna-Sin for protection. After a dream and a nocturnal visit from the moon god, Gilgamesh grew braver and picked up his weapon, lunging forth to attack. He killed every lion he saw, and he tore them limb from limb. Skinning them, he used their hides as clothing, while he ate the flesh to sustain himself. Thirsty, he would find and dig up wells that normal people would probably never find, and he drank the water from said wells.

Shamash spotted his protégé, and he spoke from above to the now ragged and haggard king. He asked him why he chose to roam, trying to tell him that he would never find eternal life. But Gilgamesh was having none of this. He effectively stated to his god that he would rest plentifully when he died, because there would be no shortage of rest in the Netherworld. For now, he wanted to see where the sun rose, to reach the place where eternal darkness stood, finishing this little response with the thought that the dead saw not a single ray of sun anyway.

After days and days of roaming, covering the amount of land which would take regular men and women months to cover, Gilgamesh finally reached the twin mountains of Mashu. These massive mountains' peaks reached the very heavens, yet their bottoms stretched all the way down to the

Netherworld. Their sole task was to guard the rising sun in the morning. Yet this "gate" of mountains was not there by itself. Two massive scorpion-men, one male and one female, were guarding it, and their very appearance would terrify regular men. Yet Gilgamesh was not a regular man. Initially he did stoop out of dread before the mighty beasts. He took note of their glance of death, their auras of fear, their massive presence towering over the already towering mountains. Yet Gilgamesh recovered surprisingly fast from this. After all, he had already slain powerful beasts in the past. As the male scorpion creature spotted the king approach them, he told his woman that the man coming to them had the flesh of the gods. The scorpion woman replied that a third of him was human, which prompted the man to speak to Gilgamesh and ask him a list of rather reasonable questions, considering the circumstance. He asked the king of Uruk how he got there, how he crossed dangerous seas, and whether or not he would regale the two guardians with his journey. Gilgamesh, in his kingly manner with some sour, rugged tinges intertwined, introduced himself, then proceeded to explain his mission to find Utanapishtim and obtain immortality. The scorpion man marveled at Gilgamesh's accomplishment in reaching them, yet he warned him of how dangerous the path was that led beyond the pass of Mashu mountains. He noted that the entire area was eternally dark, that there was no light, and—due to the missing lines of the tablet—it was hinted that other people tried to enter the pass, none succeeding. Gilgamesh gave his reply—again, a reply we cannot really piece together properly because of missing lines—which was so convincing that the scorpion man and his mate allowed him passage through the mountain pass. He asked the mountains to open up for the wanderer king, and prayed that they provide him protection.

As per the scorpion man's instruction, Gilgamesh kept in mind that he had to reach the end of the trail in 12 hours before the sun reached him. For the first seven hours things happened—yet again, unknown to us due to tablet damage—but the darkness remained thick and no light whatsoever helped the king. He picked up the pace at the eighth hour, a colder north wind hit his face at the ninth hour, he noted of how near his goal he was at the tenth hour, took to heart that he had one more hour left at the eleventh one, and right after the twelfth hour, he ran out of the exit, with the sun following literally seconds after. The brilliance took over the entire scene, and Gilgamesh found himself in what could be described as the forest of the gods.

Surveying the forest, he noted how different it was to the ones of his world. One tree, for instance, bore carnelian fruits. Another, one of lapis lazuli, was full of leaves and bore delicious-looking fruit. There were cypress and cedar trees about, some of them having leaf stems made of a particular type of stone. Elsewhere he spotted sea coral made of yet another precious gem. Stone vials replaced thorns and briars with some plants he spotted, and after touching a carob, he realized it was made of a third, different type of stone, but also of agate and hematite.

But Gilgamesh was not there to marvel at the woods made of precious materials. Even with a significant gap where missing lines of text should be, we can discern that he eventually wound up at his destination, meeting a particular female who spotted him walking from afar.

# Tablet 10: The Edge of the World

At the very edge of the human world, beyond the glorious forest of precious gems, there stood a tavern, or an inn. And at this inn was a goddess who served as its keeper, named Shiduri. Her inn overlooked a sea, and at the sea she handled her pot stands and vats made of gold, clad in hoods and veils.

Shiduri spotted Gilgamesh approaching. She felt that he had divine attributes to him but knew a sorrow invaded his heart. The animal hides and his terrifying look made the goddess feel afraid. She took him for a hunter of wild animals and wondered how to face him, what to do when he approached her. Her decision was simple as much as instinctive—she locked her doors and her gates, then climbed the roof and remained there for her safety.

Gilgamesh, however, heard the commotion. He lifted his head to spot the frightened goddess there, on the roof of her own inn. He first asked her why she even bothered to lock her doors and run up on the roof. Then he issued a very open threat to Shiduri—either she would open the gates willingly, or he would break the doors down and go after her.

Still frightened, Shiduri told Gilgamesh that she was afraid of him, which prompted her to do what she did. But she was still genuinely curious, as not many people would visit her where she lived. She asked Gilgamesh who he was and wanted to know of his journey. Right off the bat, the king of Uruk spoke about himself and Enkidu, of their initial fight and brotherhood that followed, of their mountain climbs and miles passed, of how they entered the Forest of Cedar and killed the mighty Humbaba, how they decimated lions in mountain passes both up to and after slaying of the forest ogre, how they even managed to best the mighty Bull of Heaven.

Yet Shiduri wasn't amused. She asked Gilgamesh that, if he indeed was who he said he was, if he indeed did do all of those spectacular deeds, and somehow managed to even reach her own rather unreachable abode, how come he looked the way he did. She wanted to know why his cheeks were hollow, why his face looked sullen and sunken, why his mood was so wretched, so foul, how come his look bore considerable damage, and his soul emanated sorrow. She wondered about his sunburn and frostbite. She wanted to know why a king of Gilgamesh's splendor would wear animal hides as clothing and wander around the wilderness.

Gilgamesh replied, barely subduing his sorrow. He maintained that he had very good reason to look so haggard and beaten, to bear the scarring of nature and battle, to barely look nourished, and not look content one damn bit. This time, he spoke of Enkidu differently. He once more bestowed upon him the epithets of the wildest, the strongest, the fastest, and the freest animals of the wild, admitting that he loved him dearly like a brother of his own kin. Yet even that Enkidu, that blessed being with strength and splendor that rival Gilgamesh, met the doom of death like any common man. Shiduri here learned that Gilgamesh wept for his friend for seven nights and six days, refusing to bury him, refusing to even acknowledge that Enkidu was dead. But he was ultimately convinced by a maggot crawling out of his dead brother's nose. At that point, sorrow for his fallen comrade got intertwined with a very human, very real fear of death. He did not want to die. He did not want to turn to clay like his beloved brother Enkidu. So he chose to wander the wild, to avoid death by all costs.

And it was all of this that justified his looks and his demeanor. Gilgamesh demanded from Shiduri the location of Utanapisthim, the immortal man. His ultimatum was simple—give me the location so that I may cross the ocean to the man I seek, or I would continue to roam the wild until the day I die. Shiduri tried to talk some sense into the king. The ocean, she pointed out, was so vast that no one save for Shamash could cross it. She mentioned that the ocean's vastness was merely one of the obstacles. Halfway to Utanapishtim lay the Waters of Death, where a single drop would kill a human in an instant. But since Gilgamesh was determined to reach Utanapishtim, Shiduri directed him to the immortal man's ferryman, Urshanabi. Urshanabi was in a nearby forest, cutting and gathering pines. But he wasn't alone. With him were the mysterious Stone Men, who were not affected by the Waters of Death and who kept him safe. If Urshanabi accepted, he would take Gilgamesh to Utanapishtim. If not, Gilgamesh could do whatever he wanted back at his land.

Gilgamesh, though, had a different idea. After he crept closer to Urshanabi and his Stone Men, he pulled out his ax and, with a piercing shriek, jumped neck-deep into the throng of the Stone Men. Surprised, Urshanabi reached for his own weapon, but Gilgamesh still managed to cut down every single one of his Stone Men, leaving the two non-Stone men standing. Gilgamesh, enraged and adrenaline-filled, threw their bodies into the water, and when he returned, he faced the ferryman, who was staring the madman down.

Urshanabi introduced himself as a servant of Utanapishtim the Distant and asked his opponent to return the favor and tell him his name. The king of Uruk mentioned who he was, where he was from, how he came to be where he was now, and what he had to do to get there. Mirroring Shiduri's sentiments, Urshanabi also mentioned Gilgamesh's weather-beaten features and sorrowful disposition. The entire conversation with Shiduri more or less repeated itself—Gilgamesh mentioned Enkidu, their achievements, his brother's passing, his own lamentations, his wanderings, his purpose, and his demand.

Urshanabi, however, maintained a cool head. He regretfully informed the wanderer king that he literally killed and sunk their best means of crossing the ocean mere moments ago. Lamenting that the pines remained uncut, Urshanabi proposed a different plan to Gilgamesh. The king of Uruk was to go back to the forest and cut no less than three hundred punting-poles, each five rods long with a handle. Gilgamesh did everything as instructed, then brought the poles to the ferryman. What came next was the long, depressing journey of the two men across the mighty ocean. Much like during his travels with Enkidu, Gilgamesh managed to cross in three days what most people would require a month and a half to do, proving that Urshanabi was no ordinary ferryman either.

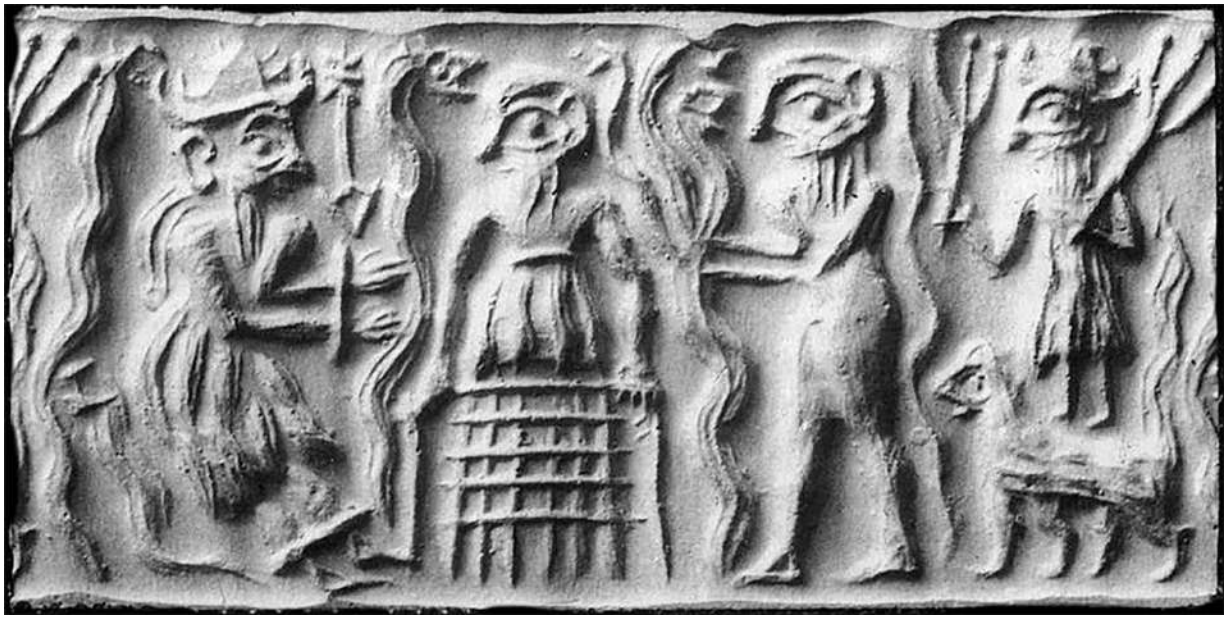
The two reached the Waters of Death. Urshanabi then instructed Gilgamesh to take up a punting-pole and push the boat onward, using it as an oar of sorts. However, he was to leave it in the water and do the same thing with the next pole, because a mere touch of the water would kill him instantly. And so he did, with the second pole, and the third, and the following seven, and the ten beyond that, continuing all the way until a 120 furlongs of water was crossed, and all of the poles were used. Urshanabi and Gilgamesh then disrobed, and the king used the clothing as a makeshift sail, holding it with his arms and letting the wind do the work.

Utanapishtim was at the coast, observing the boat. He muttered to himself that he couldn't see the Stone Men, yet that there were two men in the boat, one of whom was unknown to him. Gilgamesh, at the shore, approached Utanapishtim, asking him whether or not he was the man who joined the gods and lived forever after the mighty Deluge. And again, the exchange mirroring the one with Shiduri and Urshanabi proceeded to take place—the immortal man took notice of Gilgamesh's look, the king of Uruk spoke of his friend and his death, and he spoke of his task to beat mortality and

become undying. Yet, there was more to this particular conversation. Gilgamesh told Utanapishtim that he was seeking him out specifically. That he crossed many lands, plenty of dangerous mountains and oceans, including the ones that got him directly to Utanapishtim. That during his trip, he had very seldom time to even sleep and that his entire body, sleep-deprived, was filled to the bone with sorrow. He mentioned that his original garb was torn before he was even close to Shiduri's inn. The hides he wore he got by skinning the wild animals he later ate, and these were not just lions—bears, ibexes, hyenas, deer, panthers, cheetahs, and other game also "donated" to his clothing that he now displayed before Utanapishtim. He then made it clear that he was sick of the sorrow, sick of feeling pitiful, that he wanted to seal this feeling and continue his potentially eternal life a happy man.

Utanapishtim found all of this absurd. He asked Gilgamesh, rhetorically, whether or not it was the gods who fashioned him. It was a mystery to the eternal man that a king would chase after sorrow to such an extent. He asked Gilgamesh to compare his life to that of a fool. He was born into royalty, placed upon the throne with the order to rule those below him. A fool, on the other hand, would not get anything of quality from the gods. Gilgamesh got fresh ghee, the best flour, wore the best clothes supported by the best belt, and he was surrounded with counselors and wise men to help him conduct his business. A fool got left-over yeast, stale bran and grist, rags for clothing and a rope to keep them together, and him having any advisors whatsoever was just ridiculous to even think of. What Utanapishtim said next remains a bit too fragmentary to parse, though it has something to do with the moon god, the fool, the gods' temples and their provisioners, and a gift of sorts. What he said next, however, was crystal clear—Enkidu did die, he said, yet it was Gilgamesh who wasted his time. He brought himself one step closer to death with his efforts looking sad, pathetic, and beaten. A man's life was short, the immortal man said, cut down in an instant like a reed in a canebrake. Both young men and women, full of health and good disposition, got wiped out scarily fast by death, in the prime of their lives. Nobody had seen death before, nor would anyone see it ever. Nobody could even hear death, or describe it. Yet it stamped out men with horrifying ease. Humanity builds shelters to protect itself, argues over inheritances, feuds amongst itself, only to face death eventually. Then death would come, like a mighty river, and after said river flowed away,

nothing would remain but dirt and clay. Utanapishtim compared the dead to the abducted, yet the two, as alike as they might be, had a distinct difference between them. An abducted man might return. A dead man could not, and will not. Nobody returned from the dead to tell the tale, and that was the way it had been for centuries. It was the sons of Anu that held a great assembly after they created the world. During this assembly, they were joined with the mother goddess Aruru (who bore many names, such as Ninhursag, Mammitum, Belet-ili, etc.) and discussed how human beings would operate. And it was then, Utanapishtim stated, that they established life and death for humans. However, what they didn't do, what every man alive even before Gilgamesh's time knew, was to set up an actual time of death for humans. There was no exact number, nor exact date—a human being simply did not and could not know the time of their death.



*Cylinder seal impression. Probably Dumuzi imprisoned in the underworld.*[xix]

# Tablet 11: Gilgamesh's Journey Ends: the Deluge, Immortality, and Return to Uruk

The conversation between Gilgamesh and Utanapishtim continued, with Urshanabi listening close by, and Utanapishtim's wife hanging about doing odd things around the house and the yard. Gilgamesh noted that Utanapishtim looked no different to himself, implying that his immortality did not show. He also made it clear that he had every intention of attacking his senior in both title and age but that the very aura of Utanapishtim prevented him from doing anything of the sort. He asked Utanapishtim, at long last, how he attained eternal life.

The aged, undying man then told Gilgamesh a tale not told since the very day it happened, a tale that was so important it was considered a mystery of gods, a sacred secret not many got the chance to hear. Utanapishtim reiterated his royal origins as the at-the-time current Lugal of Shuruppak, a still active city well known to the current king of Uruk that listened to this tale. Enlil, as it turned out, pushed for ending the human race with a mighty deluge, and nearly all of the higher gods swore an oath to abide by this decision. Anu, the father of gods, swore on it, as did Ninurta and Ennugi, the chamberlain and the sheriff of the gods, as well as, of course, Enlil himself.

But one god swore an oath in a very peculiar way. The wise and powerful Ea strategically repeated the oath into a fence of reeds, a fence, more importantly, that was marking the yard of Utanapishtim's estate. Ea mentioned a few things to the king of Shuruppak, heir to the throne once held by his father Ubar-Tutu—he told him to demolish his palace and use the parts to build a massive boat. Utanapishtim was to leave all earthly riches behind and bring with him seed of all living things—in other words, two of each animal and as many plants as possible. Utanapishtim, willing to serve his god, asked him what should the elders and the other citizen of Shuruppak do. Ea had a solution. Utanapishtim was to declare that Enlil hated him and that he no longer had a choice but to move with Ea over at Abzu. Ea, within this lie of his, was to bring the people of Shuruppak plenty of rain for the crops, plenty of fish and birds, bountiful harvests, showers of bread-cakes in the morning, and torrents of wheat in the evening.

That very morning, Utanapishtim gathered as many workers as possible. Carpenters came with hatchets, reed-workers with pounding stones, shipbuilders with their own tools, etc. Both young and old men participated, as did both the rich and the poor, all in different capacity matching their social status and age. Five days later and the hull of this massive boat was done, as big as one acre, as tall and wide as ten rods, i.e., a perfect giant cube. He placed a roof on top of it, and then proceeded to divide the interior into many different chambers and sections. He would use tar and oil to glue it all up but saved a great deal storing it on the boat. Most of his men would eat the enormous amounts of meat he would slaughter from his own flocks. They also drank his alcohol non-stop, in enormous quantities. After finishing, they had a feast that rivaled the ones set up during New Years' celebrations.

Moving the finished, exceptionally massive boat was difficult for the men. They were pushing it slowly until two-thirds of it was on water. At the right hour, the one Ea told him of, he loaded everything he could onto the boat—his riches, his family and close friends, nearly every animal both domesticated and wild, etc.—and had its hatch sealed. Puzur-Enlil, a man who was ordered to seal the boat, was given Utanapishtim's palace and its goods as a reward.

The weather was getting worse, which Utanapishtim noticed. Dark storm clouds were gathering and growing more dim and dark. Adad, the god of storms, did his thing, and thunder exploded everywhere. Shullat and Hanish, personal guards of Adad, joined in the destruction. Errakal brought down the plague, and Ninurta helped the rivers overflow. The rest of the Anunnaki bore flame torches, burning everything. Winds struck the land for the whole day, and then the Deluge itself came. It was so thick and dark, even above ground, in the rain that people could not even recognize, or rather even see, themselves. Destruction of the world was so vast that even the gods themselves got scared and took refuge. They all hid in Anu's palace, and Aruru lamented her children dying, moaning about all of her efforts wasted. To her, these men were her children, and now they were becoming one with the flood water. Other gods wept with Aruru, getting more feverish and ill by the minute while the Deluge raged. Seven nights and six days the Deluge raged, after which it subsided, flattening the land and leaving everything looking like a massive ocean. Everything was calm again.

The sun's shine hit Utanapishtim's face, making him kneel and weep, thanking Ea and other gods for surviving. He spotted 14 small islands in the horizon distance, yet his boat was stuck on the top of the sunk mountain of Nimush. Seven days after being "beached," Utanapishtim sent a dove to find land, which it didn't as it returned to him. The swallow fared no better than the dove. However, the raven did, as it ate a little twig from a tree and proceeded to fly further, not returning. To Utanapishtim, this was the sign to disembark his boat of salvation.

On the shore, Utanapishtim made an offering to the gods in the form of burning incense atop of a mountain and setting a table with a meal. He also burned reeds, cedarwood, and myrtle to help this along. The gods felt the nice smell, and all came down to enjoy the feast. Aruru lifted her necklace made of lapis lazuli by her consort, asking him to never let her forget these days of great tragedy. She specifically asked that Enlil not attend this offering, for it was his foolish idea to genocide the people with a Deluge.

But Enlil did appear, and the minute he spotted Utanapishtim, he raged on yelling at the gods. He was pretty clear that no man was to survive the Deluge, and that one of the gods was responsible for him surviving. Ninurta made the right guess in saying that it was probably Ea, which Ea dodged and did not acknowledge, letting Enlil know that flooding the world was a stupid idea. He barked at Enlil about how every crime had its just punishment, that he should loosen when it's tight and tighten if it's loose. He suggested several different solutions that would have worked better than the Deluge, such as ravenous lions, wolves, a famine, or a plague. However, Ea was playing a bit coy with his role in letting Utanapishtim live. He stated that he merely repeated the oath next to a reed fence, and that the man now standing before them merely heard it, specific boat details and all. It was now up to Enlil to decide what to do with the poor survivor of his Deluge.

Enlil, surely not feeling happy about what was going to transpire, boarded the massive boat and approached Utanapishtim and his wife. He made them kneel, touched their foreheads, and made them immortal, declaring that they were now like gods. However, this came at a price. They were to live far away from absolutely everyone, at the edge of the known world, where rivers flowed upwards and no life flourished.

It was at this point in the story that Utanapishtim talked directly to Gilgamesh. He asked him, somewhat mockingly, who was going to vouch for him to get immortality, how he would gather all of the major gods to

deliberate on that. Deeming him unworthy for immortality, he told Gilgamesh to try not sleeping for seven nights, and then he might begin to think about living forever. Gilgamesh, of course, accepted, and he, of course, fell asleep the minute he sat down. Utanapishtim then spoke with his wife. She asked him to awaken the poor sod, but he maintained that men are liars by nature, and that Gilgamesh would try to lie to them the minute he woke up. The wife then got instructions to bake one bread every day he was asleep. She would then line them up against the wall, next to the head of the wanderer king, and mark them each with the day they were baked. She did all of this. The first bread looked dry, the second was chewy like leather, the third was all soggy, the fourth turned white, the fifth was grey due to mold, the sixth was freshly baked, while the seventh was in the oven when Utanapishtim touched Gilgamesh to wake him. Predictably, the king of Uruk lied and said that he was just starting to fall asleep when the eternal man touched him. Utanapishtim merely pointed to the line of breads on the floor, describing each one to the beaten king.

Gilgamesh became desperate. He fell to his knees, crying about death lurking everywhere, even within him. He wanted to end it all, unable to reach his goal. Utanapishtim did not respond to this. He turned to the ferryman Urshanabi, punishing him for bringing Gilgamesh, thereby banishing him and his ferry from ever reaching Utanapishtim again. He then ordered the boat owner to take Gilgamesh to the bathroom, where he would wash his hair and body clean. The pelts he wore were to be tossed into the ocean, new clothing was to be made fit for a king, so that Gilgamesh would return to Uruk the way a king should return. Urshanabi obeyed, and soon enough, Gilgamesh was back to his original splendor.

The moment they set sail, Utanapishtim's wife asked her husband to provide the king with some kind of gift for reaching this far during his quest. Gilgamesh did not want to waste this new opportunity, turning the boat around back onto Utanapishtim's shore. The immortal man decided to agree with his wife in terms of awarding Gilgamesh somehow. He then disclosed another highly-kept secret of the gods. At the bottom of the mighty Abzu there was a plant that looked not unlike a box-thorn with prickles like a dog rose, sharp to anyone who takes it. Ingesting this plant would restore youth, so Gilgamesh might get at least that. Hearing this, Gilgamesh dug a massively deep ditch, which he followed up by tying his legs to two massive stones and hurling himself downward. Reaching Abzu,

he spotted the plant and picked it up, cutting off the stones and launching himself back onto the surface. In a rare moment of selflessness, he told Urshanabi that this so-called Plant of Heartbeat would prove useful to both him and his citizens. He would test it on an old person, and if they were to turn young, he would ingest some himself and plant the rest for the generations to come. It would then bear the name Old Man Grown Young.

Much like during his travels with Enkidu, Gilgamesh would pause with Urshanabi every 20 leagues to break bread, and every 30 leagues to lodge for the night. During one of these lodges, Gilgamesh spotted a pool of cool water, where he decided to take a dip, leaving the plant on the ground. A snake was attracted to the plant's fragrance and took it in its mouth, slithering away and shedding its skin. Gilgamesh had lost again, and he was crying harder than ever before. He rhetorically asked the ferryman of what his toils and tribulations amounted to now, what had he accomplished now that an animal took away the mighty plant. Worst of all, they had no way of returning to the place where he pulled out the plant, and had he left the boat where it was, he would have gotten back and just took another sapling.

They kept on traveling for miles and miles, until they finally reached the glorious city of Uruk. At this point, Gilgamesh spoke to his ferryman and urged him to climb the mighty city walls and survey the grand city that the king himself rebuilt. And thus the epic ends, with Gilgamesh literally uttering the same words from the beginning, closing the circle and letting both his listener and the readers know that the same man who composed the epic is the man who went through a journey of adventure and pain, of fear and bravery, a man who saw the deep and reached the ends of the earth, a man who earned his wisdom and, despite not reaching immortality, managed to attain one thing to distinguish him among the masses—that man was the very king Gilgamesh, and his legacy was the very beautiful city over which he reigned.

*Tablet XI or the Flood Tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, c. 7th century BC*[xx]

## Some Notes on the Epic

All eleven tablets have places and elements in them that have captivated the imagination of scholars. For instance, the first two tablets, detailing the first encounter of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as well as Gilgamesh's subsequent behavior and mannerisms, have led some modern scholars to believe that he was a homosexual. And judging from the modern perspective, some use of language in the epic (Gilgamesh often talks of embracing Enkidu like a husband embraces a wife, he wails like a widow at his death, he covers his eyes making him resemble a bride) and their actions (the two kissing after the battle and often walking places hand in hand) seems to reinforce this. However, like many literary devices in ancient writings, this type of language was most likely used to represent kinship in a very stylized way, much like, for instance, the use of numbers to mark the quantity of something ("eight thousand suns" or "eight thousand arms" in the Mahabharata, for example, simply meant "very bright" or "an uncountable amount of arms"). Throughout the epic, the heterosexuality of both characters is more than evident, and the heavy metaphors regarding lovers were used to emphasize how close their friendship had become.

Another favorite place to delve into is the episode of Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven. Some scholars have suggested that her proposal to Gilgamesh, and his subsequent refusal, are more than him merely saying "no" to marriage

due to her reputation. The way Ishtar phrases things, a case can be made that she's actually trying to convince him to die. Exchanging earthly delights to be with a goddess might just be a thinly-veiled dispatching of Gilgamesh to the Netherworld, where, according to Sumerian tradition, he was destined to rule over the dead like a lesser god. Considering this was a new addition to the epic even at the time it was written, it's not impossible to think this way.

And speaking of new additions, the "original" original text actually ended with the Edge of the World episode. Shiduri was supposed to be the one to send Gilgamesh back to Uruk after his wanderings. The flood episode was likely added later, with the odd Tablet XII (considered non-canon to the epic proper by most scholars, though not by some) following soon after, but even within the Utanapishtim episode, there are instances of new added to the old. Namely, yet another version of the epic might have been Gilgamesh failing his task to stay awake, and Utanapishtim merely sending him and Urshanabi to Uruk, without the plant being as much as mentioned. Additions of these episodes might have been a conscious effort of the ancient Babylonian scribe to streamline the narrative more fluidly, making it the masterpiece that it was back then and still is today.

# Sumerian Poems About Gilgamesh

To this day, five more or less readable poems of Gilgamesh which predate the Akkadian epic have been found and translated. These poems were normally found in several key cities of Old Babylon, written down and translated by Akkadian scribes. A few of these were so popular that several tablets including them as material were found throughout Sumerian schools, private homes, and libraries, which means that students often found them inspirational and copied them frequently.

Of the five, three correspond, more or less, with many important elements in the standard version of the later Akkadian epic. Some elements and situations differ, as do names of the gods and the titular hero himself (in these versions, he is called Bilgames; for the sake of continuity, his name will remain the same as in the Akkadian standard version, while all other names will retain their original form), which were all Sumerian.

An average reader can more or less understand, from these five tales alone, why Gilgamesh was such a popular character immortalized by several Babylonian nations in cuneiform. They paint a picture of a brave, yet

flawed, king who uses both brute strength and wits to overcome his tasks. The poems also touched upon the nature of life and death, a topic well known to the ancient peoples and one that scarcely stopped being important even today. Gilgamesh might be a king and a demigod in these poems, but he is no less human than other mortals, and the same fate that comes to us all overcomes him, leaving behind a powerful literary and inspirational legacy.

# Gilgamesh and Akka

This short poem begins with the envoys of Akka, the son of Enmebaragesi and the king of Kish, entering Uruk. They confront Gilgamesh and demand he empty all of the wells of the land, both shallow and deep. The most likely interpretation of this is that they demand surrender of Uruk to Kish in terms of direct vassalage. Kish, at the time, was the dominant city of Mesopotamia and served as a de facto capital, with the title "king of Kish" remaining coveted even long after the death of the actors of this poem. However, Gilgamesh doesn't want to act rashly. He visits the elders of Uruk, the men making up the Upper House of the council, and asks them what to do. They unequivocally support surrendering to Akka and emptying the wells. However, Gilgamesh isn't pleased with this answer, so he goes to the young men of Uruk, a warrior class with some moderate influence on the city-state affairs. Their answer to the ultimatum of Akka is to stand and fight, which Gilgamesh accepts. They praise the god-king, originally of Uruk's district of Kullab (a name reappearing in nearly all of the poems, suggesting its significance) noting his great temple dedicated to Inanna and the massive walls surrounding Uruk, which the god-king himself issued to be built. Gilgamesh, having listened to all of this praise heaped upon him, turns to Enkidu and tells him to ready the weapons, gather the men, and let loose the dogs of war. He notes that they should allow Akka to invade Uruk so that he would fear Gilgamesh even more when he actually lays his eyes on him.

Akka, roughly two weeks later, decides to lay waste to Uruk. Within Gilgamesh's camp, one brave royal bodyguard with the name Birhurturra offers himself to be captured by Akka, which happens soon after. He is bound, gagged, beaten, and tortured by the men of Kish. Akka, during all of this, spots a Steward of Uruk climbing the wall and observing. He asks the tortured soldier if the man on the wall is Gilgamesh. Birhurturra plays coy and answers in a line of rhetorical questions, asking the ruler of Kish if Gilgamesh really looked as ordinary as that man on the wall, following this by asking whether or not a series of events proving Gilgamesh's bravery would not take place if the man on the wall was, indeed, him. For this reply, Birhurturra gets an additional beating.

Right after the Steward, Gilgamesh himself mounted the wall, and immediately the army, led by Enkidu, took point. Akka spots this man and

asks Birhurturra the same question, this time getting a positive response. The armies clash, and soon enough Uruk prevails, with Gilgamesh's forces capturing Akka.

In his cell, Akka pleads with Gilgamesh to release him. Gilgamesh proves to be a merciful king, reminding Akka that he, too, was once a prisoner of Kish, and that the king there, the very king bound before him now, treated him with utmost respect. Akka admits Uruk's supremacy and states that the gods clearly favor Gilgamesh. They part ways, and Gilgamesh retains his status as a feared and respected hero.

# Gilgamesh and Huwawa

This text has two versions, both named after their first few verses. They differ in a few key aspects but largely speak of the same story that was told in Tablets III and IV in the Akkadian standard version of the epic, i.e., the slaying of Humbaba/Huwawa and the bounty in the form of mighty cedar trees.

The story begins with Gilgamesh and Enkidu discussing the nature of human mortality. The mighty god-king tells his adoptive brother that he doesn't want to die and be forgotten like most other men. He seeks immortality, and if he cannot have one in practical terms, he will have one in eternal glory which generations past him will retell. To do this, he has to cut down the forest of cedars and slay its guardian, Huwawa. Enkidu rightfully notes that Gilgamesh must speak to the sun god Utu for guidance. Sacrificing two lambs, Gilgamesh lays prostrate before his god and asks for help. Utu gives the king seven brethren warriors, all with different abilities: one had lion paws and eagle talons, the other the face of a cobra, the third the look of a dragon serpent, the fourth spat fire, the fifth looked like a serpent with a mighty tongue, the sixth had the powers of a torrent, and the seventh shot lightning. Goddess Nissaba is also to provide illumination, helping the god-king with his task. With these men, Gilgamesh goes to Uruk and summons all men to the town square. He asks for 50 warriors without immediate family who will help him in cutting down cedars and killing the mighty Huwawa, and 50 volunteers apply. He then goes to the forge, has mighty weapons fashioned for him, then moves with his army to the forest of cedars. He crosses six mountain ranges, and only on the seventh does he find the cedar trees he wants. Warriors start cutting them down, which enrages the mighty Huwawa, prompting him to jump out and roar. All seven of his protective auras are active, and this makes everyone faint in fear. Enkidu awakens first, then berates Gilgamesh for lying there and not going after the mighty ogre. He notes that all of the warriors lie there unconscious, and that it's just the two of them against the beast. Invoking his mother Ninsun and his father Lugalbanda, the god-king steadfastly decides not to move anywhere until Huwawa is slain, which prompts Enkidu to ask to leave for Uruk and inform Ninsun of Gilgamesh's eventual victory or demise. But Gilgamesh urges Enkidu to stay, for two of

them are stronger than one. Enkidu reluctantly agrees and the two move forward.

Huwawa spots the warrior approaching him and, by merely speaking and in doing so mentioning that Gilgamesh has come here in vain, he makes the god-king freeze in fear. Huwawa tells him not to be afraid, but to get on all fours and ask of what he wants. Gilgamesh does so, and begins a chain of offerings in order to gain Huwawa's auras and become his next of kin. He offers two sisters of his (the older is humorously named Enmebaragesi, the younger Peshtur), flour and water, big and small sandals for Huwawa's two sets of feet, precious stones, and two more gifts which remain unknown due to tablet damage. Every time Gilgamesh offers something, Huwawa sheds an aura, which the men below pack up neatly and tie down. Now aura-less, Huwawa begins to retire, but Gilgamesh follows and smacks him with a fist, enraging him. However, this rage will prove ineffective, as Gilgamesh manages to tie the beast up with some help of Enkidu. Huwawa begs for his life, which, unlike in the standard Akkadian version of the epic, Gilgamesh considers. He tells Enkidu that Huwawa can be his servant and vassal, which Enkidu vehemently refuses, noting to Gilgamesh that others might return from their release, but not him, not in this situation. Huwawa teases Enkidu for his servile attitude towards Gilgamesh, which prompts the wild man to angrily strike the beast at its neck and cut off its head.

The two heroes present the head to Enlil and his consort Ninlil. Enlil is properly enraged, bemoaning the fact that Gilgamesh did not let him go. Yet, he still makes use of the auras, dividing them among many areas and creatures: the field, the river, the canebrake, the lion, the woods, the palace, and finally to the goddess Nungal. Any other minor auras he kept for himself.

One key difference between the two version of these poems is the point when Gilgamesh and Enkidu awaken from the effects of Huwawa's auras. Gilgamesh doesn't convince his friend to go after the beast immediately. Instead, he asks Enki for help, to give him wisdom and beat Huwawa with less effort. The minute this happens, the entire aura exchange takes place.

# Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven

The least well preserved, this tablet is also a direct influence on the standard version, specifically Tablet VI. The poem begins with Gilgamesh speaking to his mother Ninsun, where she tells him to go down to the river with a

scythe and cut down some plants but also to wash himself off. The exact purpose of these orders is not particularly well understood from the source material, and these acts are likely parts of some ritual. Gilgamesh does so, and while he's washing himself, Uruk's chief deity Inanna spots him, getting aroused. She propositions the hero to be her consort, but Gilgamesh's mother dissuades him from this. His own response to her remains unfound, but the immediate aftermath gives us an idea of what happened—he probably listed all of her former failed lovers and promptly told her off. Inanna is now in the heavens, crying and begging her father An to give her the Bull of Heaven. An reminds her that the Bull feasts on stars and that the earth would not sate it. Inanna threatens to scream, which she does, unbearably so. An acquiesces and gives her the Bull, which she leads down onto the earth by its rope. The Bull grazes on all of the greenery and drinks up all of the water, causing panic.

Lugalgabangal, the minstrel of Gilgamesh, spots this and rushes to his king, who is in a tavern drinking and reveling. He tells him of what Inanna did, but Gilgamesh is unphased. He readies his weapons and tells his mother, as well as his younger sister Peshtur, to go into the temple and protect themselves. He promises to smite the Bull, to throw his corpse in the narrow streets, his intestines in the broader streets, to give its meat to the poor, and to use its horns as oil flasks at the temple Eanna, in Inanna's honor. A version of the poem has Gilgamesh repeating this same threat to the very Bull itself, after which he and Enkidu smite him. Gilgamesh cuts off a thigh and throws it at Inanna, who has been sitting atop the city walls crying. She falls down, and the very wall shatters. Through tears, Gilgamesh makes sure Inanna realizes that she would have ended up like that had he wanted her to. The division of the Bull's meat and bones ends up exactly as Gilgamesh predicted it.

## Gilgamesh and the Netherworld

This poem also has a few versions, but most are just the original with a few lines added later. One sizable section of this poem became Tablet XII of the standard Akkadian version. Unlike other poems, this one starts off with a summary of events that happened right after the Creation of the World, i.e., it starts off with mythology. Enki is sailing, and hail strikes his boat, almost sinking it and making the god flail in fear. During this storm, a willow tree gets uprooted by the wind and is washed ashore by the river Euphrates.

Inanna takes the tree, planting and watering it with her foot and expecting it to grow so she can use it to make furniture. But three dangerous creatures move into the tree. A Snake Which Knows No Charm nests in its roots, a Thunderbird lays eggs in the canopy, and a Demon-Maiden moves within the trunk. Inanna asks her brother Utu to help her remove these beasts, but the sun god refuses despite her invoking the major deities she respects and hails. Desperate, she turns to Gilgamesh with the selfsame request, which he accepts and promptly executes. The Snake dies at the hands and weapons of this well-clad demigod, whereas the Thunderbird and the Demon-Maiden depart on their own. Most of the lumber goes to Inanna, other than a few choice parts from the roots and the branches. Gilgamesh makes two objects, the pukku and the mikku, one from the roots, the other from the branches. Scholars still debate as to what the pukku and the mikku might be, with some suggesting instruments and others suggesting artefacts of power. The most commonly accepted solution is that the pukku is a ball and that the mikku is a mallet.

Gilgamesh takes these two objects to Uruk, and the young men, himself included, play with it for hours on end. However, due to complaints from the women of the city, both objects fell down into the Netherworld, the domain of the mighty and horrific goddess Ereshkigal. Not able to reach them, Gilgamesh sobs for his artefacts, which prompts Enkidu to offer himself to get them back. Gilgamesh sits Enkidu down and explains to him what he absolutely must not do when traveling to the Netherworld—no clean clothing, no sweet oil anointment, no throwstick hurling, no cornel rods, no sandal wearing, no kissing of beloved wives and sons nor hitting of hated ones. Should he do any of these things, the sorrowful Ereshkigal would capture him. Even Gilgamesh's description of her is soaked in anguish—she lies naked onto a massive bed, clawing at herself with her fingernails and tearing out her hair, all because she still grieves for her son Ninazu.

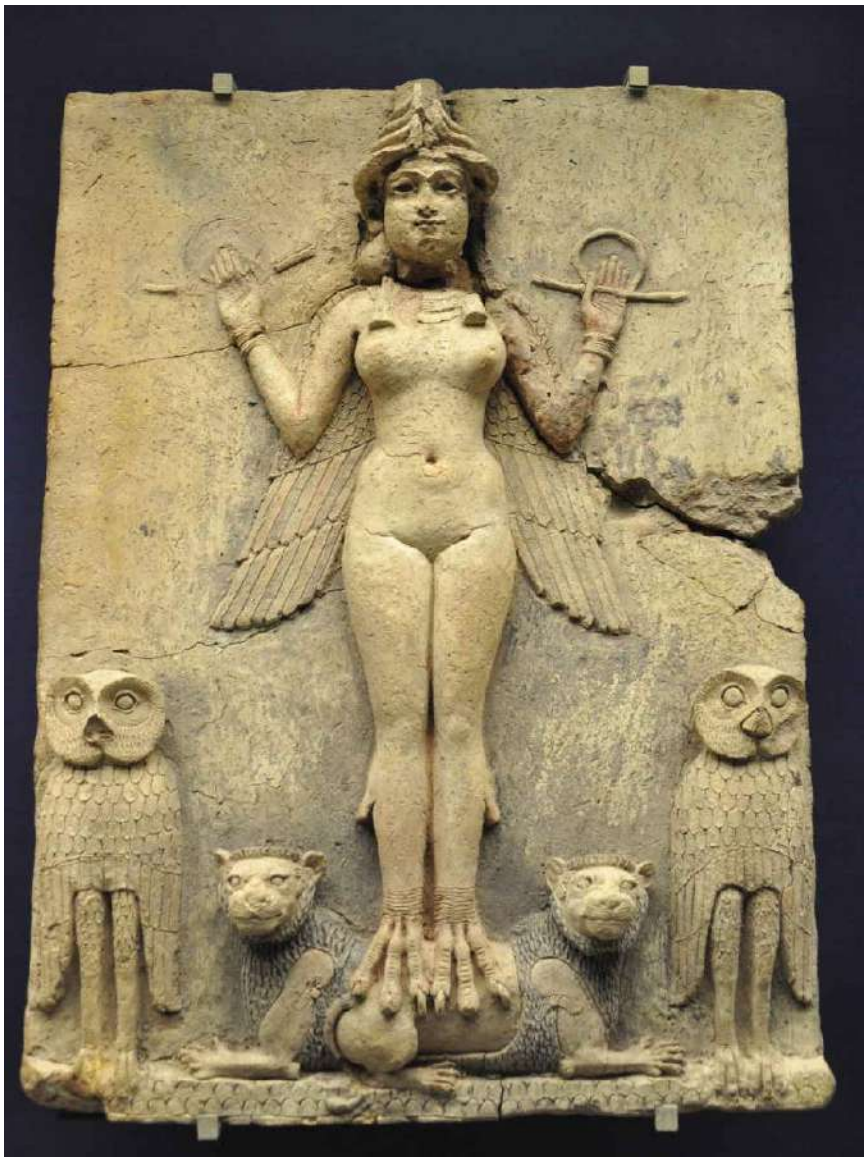
Enkidu, of course, does the exact damn opposite of what Gilgamesh said, word for word. And lo and behold, he gets captured. Gilgamesh, desperate, begs several gods for help, such as Enlil, Nanna, and Enki. It is Enki who ultimately helps by asking Utu to bring forth Enkidu's shadow and briefly open the doors of the Netherworld so that the two brothers may unite. This transpires, and Enkidu, bombarded with questions from his god-king brother about the Netherworld, first tells him to prepare himself for a lot of

tears, then states that his body is decaying and that he doesn't have a whole lot to eat at the table of the dead.

From Enkidu, Gilgamesh learns that all fathers who had several sons have a decent, albeit painful, seat at the table. Fathers with no heirs eat bread that tastes like a brick. Eunuchs that knew no pleasure are propped against the table worthless, and barren women fare no better. Similar fates await both male and female virgins of non-priestly class. Lepers, plague-stricken folk, mauled people, men who fell off roofs, drowned men—all of them weep for the loss of the inaction of their body parts, for they do not get them back in the Netherworld. Disrespectful parents and children alike are treated horribly, whereas fallen heroes have their families weep for them in reverence. Stillborn babies and prematurely dead men enjoy the best accommodations, whereas men struck by mooring poles and men without anyone to pay them tribute suffer. But the worst fate awaits those burned in flames, for their spirits disappear in smoke. They are not in the Netherworld, and this is where the original poem ends.

However, some versions found in various excavation sites had modern (at the time) additions. Gilgamesh asks further questions, of men who broke sacred oaths, for instance. But the most damning part of the poem, the one that makes this section more contemporary than the rest, is the part with the following few questions. The first deals with the citizens of Girsu which was, at the time this section was written, taken over by Amorites. The sons of Sumer and Akkad suffer because of this, as do Gilgamesh's parents, as they must drink bloody, muddy water due to the war. Gilgamesh returns to his city and promises his parents' statues that he will do his best to have all of the people that fell under the Amorites drink clear water.

There are minor differences between this poem and the Tablet XII, largely when it comes to Gilgamesh's begging and Enkidu's details on who suffers in what way in the Netherworld.



*Queen of the Night relief, or Burney Relief, probably representing the goddess Ereshkigal, c. 19th-18th century BC*[xxi].

# The Death of Gilgamesh

This poem has some tangential links to Tablet VI, if only because it actually puts into practice what Ishtar of the Epic told Gilgamesh would happen once he lost his life. In this poem we find the great god-king in his bed, weak and ready to die. The poet recounts his great feats, contrasting them to the person now lying there and breathing his last breaths. Six days pass with him in bed, and he falls asleep, dreaming a magnificent dream, through the eyes of the god Enki.

In this dream, Gilgamesh stands before the assembly of the gods. They list off his achievements: slaying of Huwawa and the Bull of Heaven, cutting down the cedar trees, besting wild beasts, reaching Ziusudra and learning of the Deluge, building up Uruk, and returning forgotten sacred rites to its citizenry. Yet, even with all of these feats, Gilgamesh cannot join the gods after death. After all, two-thirds of him might be divine, but one is very much human. However, while he might get cast into the Netherworld, he will retain a semblance of his kingly life—he will become a lesser god, the Netherworld's governor, chief of the shades, and he will pass judgment onto the dead and render verdicts. He will be like Dumuzi or Ningishzida, if not more important.

On the surface, young men, under the Dream God Sissig, will make funerary statues and wrestle in the honor of Gilgamesh during the Month of Torches. They will celebrate Gilgamesh for many generations to come, making him effectively immortal.

Enlil then speaks to Gilgamesh directly. He tells him that death is inevitable, that he himself was caught by the same thing catching every man, woman, and child. He mentions to him that he should give in, travel to the Netherworld, reunite with his father, his sisters, and his brother Enkidu. Kings and priests shall kiss his feet and he will spend the rest of his days surrounded by consorts and serfs.

Now awake, Gilgamesh relays the dream to others, invoking his lineage and his successes. He reiterates the issue regarding festivals and confirms what Enlil said about him descending into the great beyond and reuniting with his loved ones. He employs architects to design his tomb, with some help from Enki turned into a dog. Many men work on the tomb, and the very river Euphrates flows off course and parts to make room for the tomb's location. He makes separate chambers for his family, priests, servants, and so on. He then offers tributes to many gods and goddesses—Ereshkigal, Namtar, Dimpikug, Bitti, Ningishzida, Dumuzi, Enki, Ninki, Enmul, Ninmul, Endukuga, Nindukuga, Endashurimma, Nindashurimma, Enutila, Enmesharra—for both the mother and the father of Enlik, for Shulpae and Shakken, for all of the Anunnaki/Igigi, and for every priest serving them.

After the burial, the men seal the hatch from outside, and Euphrates floods the tomb, resuming its normal course. Men and women of Uruk weep and wail for their fallen king, and even the heavens shed a tear. Festivals in his name become a regularity, and the poem ends with the praise of Ereshkigal

of the Netherworld. Yet another version of the poem ends on a more definite note, praising Gilgamesh for all of the time to come.

# Conclusion

If the amount of data that came out just these past five years or so is any indication, the Epic of the Sumerian demigod Gilgamesh will not go away any time soon. The original 12 tablets are still kept in a museum, with more new information coming out every so often that offers one more piece of this ancient puzzle. Interest by archeologists in Sumerian life and culture has come a long way, and hopefully a more complete, more intricate, version of the story will see the light of day soon.

Yet, the cultural significance of Gilgamesh himself seems to have outgrown the character. In a way, he managed not to really fail to achieve immortality but rather to achieve it not once, but twice. The first time was when old Sumerian scribes of the Third Dynasty of Ur decided to copy and preserve the most popular of his legendary exploits, giving their students plenty of room to learn of this tale and even experiment with it. Sumerians passed this love of Gilgamesh onto Akkadians, and later on their close relatives the Babylonians. Assyrians, too, loved this story, as did the Hittites, and other Mesopotamian men of letters, or even all people in general. Sîn-lēqi-unninni, too, helped contribute to this immortality of Gilgamesh, forever immortalizing him onto clay tablets that would survive many thousands of years later, locked away in a royal library and evading dozens upon hundreds of invasions, catastrophes, and plight.

Gilgamesh's second ascent to immortality came with Layard and Rassam, with Smith, and later George. It came with the modern age, allowing us roughly a century and a half to learn all we could about this two-thirds-God-one-third-human hero that knew both triumph and tragedy, both victory and defeat, and that—most of all—still felt like any other human would in those situations. Gilgamesh re-rose to prominence and managed to garner a different kind of following, with different kinds of rituals in different kinds of lands. He went way past the titles like king of Uruk or king of Kish, and in some sense went on to spend his days as more than a judge in the Underworld. He has become a mainstay of world heritage, the first proper hero of literature ever recorded, the most legendary king of the ancient Asia Minor. He who saw the deep has managed to surpass all kings, all gods, even his own city of Uruk. Gilgamesh had grown immortal anew and will remain as such surely for a few more millennia ahead.

*Mace dedicated to Gilgamesh, between 2112 and 2004 BC*[xxii].

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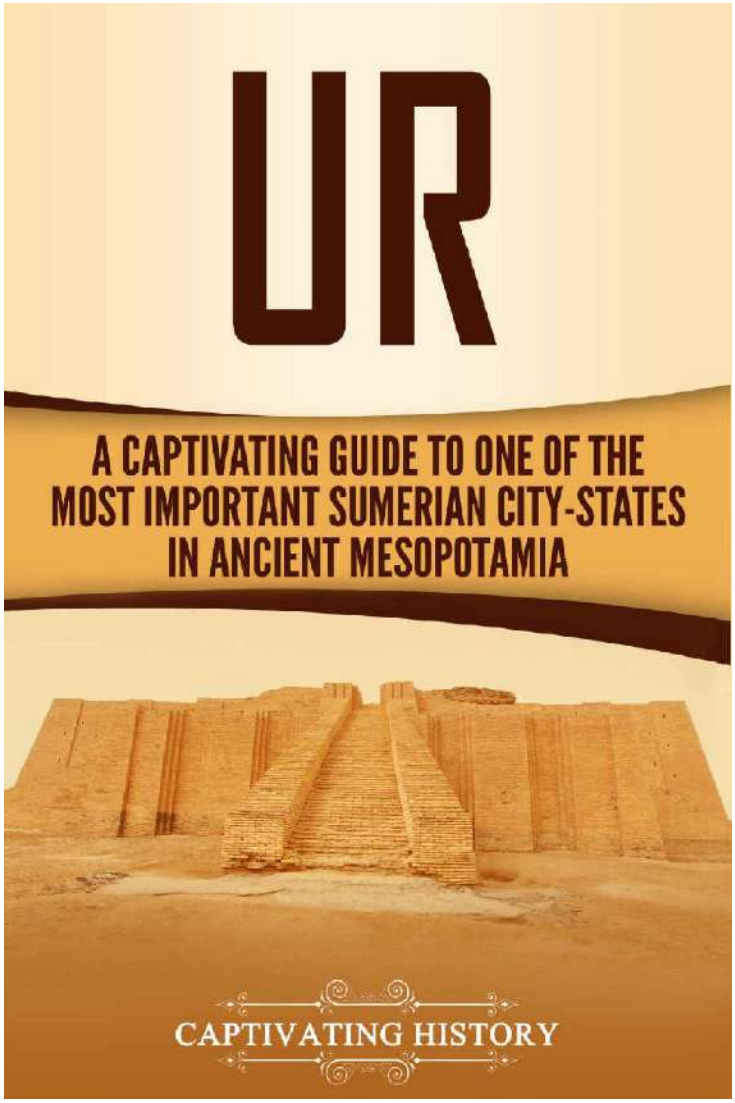
# Part 3: Ur

## *A Captivating Guide to One of the Most Important Sumerian City-States in Ancient Mesopotamia*



# Introduction

If you were to visit Iraq and go to the Dhi Qar Governorate to the south, right there next to the Persian Gulf, some 16 km/9.4 miles from the city of Nasiriyah, you will run into the site called Tell el-Muqayyar. At first it doesn't look like much, but then you spot that mountain-like structure in the distance. The closer you get, you see what looks like city remains. Torn bases of walls, foundations of houses, something that's a bit too big to be a regular house, yet you can't tell what it is.

The building reminds you of something. Probably a pyramid, but more Mayan or Incan, with more terraces, more layers. No, that's not right. This one is different. It gives you the vibe of Babylon, but not quite. The bricks are odd, not quite straight, yet not quite circular. You can spot an odd bone here or there, several modern-day markers, largely in Arabic, and maybe, just maybe, a few people digging around and talking about what they pull out. You're definitely at an ancient site, but which one?

You might even spot a few priests there, at the site, discussing things and, if you're lucky enough to see it, making the sign of the cross or the crescent. You're now sure this is an important site but can't quite place it. You see traces of what seems like a canal. Then you note a large area which somewhat feels like death, and you recognize it as a cemetery. A big one at that. One that might look like it contains the remains of people of high social standing. Now you KNOW this site isn't any old site. And soon enough, you connect the dots the moment you spot a Sumerian statue and cuneiform writing, the minute you take note of several different scripts next to that, some in Arabic, some in Greek, some in Hebrew.

Yes. This place, here, where you are, that's the ancient city of Ur.

The city which houses the mighty Ziggurat. The Biblical "Ur of the Chaldees" where Abraham was supposedly born. The site near which the earliest human cultures were found. The site which held the most glorious Sumerian Dynasty in ancient history. That Ur is right here before you. Much in the same way it was before Sir Leonard Woolley in the early twenties of the last century attempted and succeeded to open it up to the world again. The city that was destined to die and be reborn every millennium or so, a city full of intrigue, magnificence, tragedy, and glory.

Reading this book, you will get a sense of how Ur came to existence, how it grew, reached its zenith, fell, re-rose, and ultimately perished until it reemerged a little over a century and a half ago. You will learn of its history, laden with wars, trade, divine worship, political corruption, and entertainment. You will know why people of Abrahamic faiths in particular hold this city in high regard. And, hopefully, you'll wish that the visit to this spectacular city described in this introduction was real and that you could visit it immediately.

# Chapter 1 – The Brief History of Ur: Founding of the City, Rise, Fall, Rediscovery

Ur is known as one of the post-diluvian cities of ancient Sumer, i.e., it came to prominence after the mythical Deluge. The first human settlement can be dated as far back as 3800 BC and was part of the so-called Ubaid culture, which will be discussed in the following chapter. The city itself was historically mentioned in writing back in 26th century BC. According to the document known as the Sumerian King's List, which was written much later, during the so-called Isin-Larsa period, a certain Mesannepada or Mesh-Ane-Pada was the first ruler of the First Dynasty of Ur. Inscriptions and insignia of several kings not mentioned in the King's List were found in the royal cemetery of Ur, indicating that Mesannepada was an actual historical king of the city proper.

Little is known of the city during the period of both the First and Second Dynasties of Ur, but roughly around 2270 BC (or even a couple of decades later), Sargon the Great conquered most of the Sumerian city-states, establishing Akkadian dominion over them. Ur itself doesn't offer a lot of evidence dating to this period, but from what the archeologists could make out based on the remains found in graves dating back to this time period, Ur played an important role back then as well, with Sargon and his successors seeing the city as an important religious and cultural place at the time.

After the Akkadians fell under the nomadic Gutians, Ur regained de facto sovereignty, and it wasn't until Utu-hengal of Uruk that the city would see itself rise again, namely due to Utu-hengal appointing Ur-nammu as the governor of Ur, which would prove disastrous for him. Ur-nammu, in turn, became a powerful ruler, and the control of most of Sumer fell to Ur again. With this king starts the famed Third Dynasty of Ur and the prosperous Ur III Period, possibly the highest point of this city-state's long existence. During the reign of the five kings from this dynasty, especially Ur-nammu and his son Shulgi, Ur became a cultural and economic powerhouse, rivaling that of older, more highly-respected cities, such as Kish or Nippur.

After the last ruler of this dynasty, Ibi-sin (or Ibi-suen) suffered a devastating and humiliating defeat under the nomadic Elamites, as well as other tribes, Ur began its rapid decline. Later rulers of both Isin and Larsa Dynasties would incorporate the city within their own vastly smaller

empires, until its control would ultimately fall to Hammurabi of Babylon. Babylonians held their dominion over Ur with two rulers, Hammurabi and Samsu-iluna. After the latter left the city, it went under the control of the nomadic Kassites, who took control and ruled over the city until the early rise of the Assyrians in the north. The so-called Sealand Dynasty of kings followed, yet Assyrians reclaimed the lands soon after. The so-called Chaldean, or Neo-Babylonian, kings seized control of the city not long after, earning the city its biblical title "Ur of the Chaldees." The Neo-Babylonian kings would be the last known rulers to undertake major reconstructions and reparations of the city, and the last known people to live there were early Persians. Roughly around 500 BC, when the entire Mesopotamian region was dominated by Persia, Ur had already been abandoned, largely due to river pattern changes and the subsequent drought that followed.

However, Ur would not remain abandoned for long. As far back as 1625, the Italian composer and author Pietro della Valle visited the ancient site of Ur. He identified a few inscribed bricks and took them with him to Italy, making this the first ever time in recorded history that post-ancient Europe came into contact with Sumerian culture in any way, shape, or form. The first proper expeditions to excavate and explore Mesopotamian sites came in the early 19th century, with Ur proper being visited by several important explorers such as Colonel Cheney, J.E. Taylor, H. R. Hall, and, most famously, Sir Leonard Woolley in the early 20th century. It was during Woolley's expeditions that most major excavations took place and when most notable sites were identified. Despite his own biases due to his highly-held religious beliefs, as well as notable errors in judgment when it came to dating and describing the elements of the city, Woolley's contribution remains a major one, and he has thus far set the highest possible standards in modern archeology when it comes to ancient sites. He was also an incredible "promoter," in a sense. During his time at the site, he would proudly describe his finds to curious onlookers as if he were describing a neighbor's house, with some saying that he spoke of the long-passed inhabitants of the ruins as if he were telling a story or a legend. Numerous tourists, including the famed author Agatha Christie, came flocking to Iraq to see the place where biblical Abraham was supposedly born and to bask in the old glory of the long-dead Sumerians.

Even today, Ur continues to fascinate both Biblical scholars and archeologists alike. Academic papers, studies, and books still appear on a near-yearly basis, and constant new finds and improvements in dating and excavation techniques give the general public a far clearer picture of what life was like in Ur more than five thousand years ago. The following chapters will deal with Ur in depth, from its earliest Ubaid era to the fall and eventual rediscovery of the city.

# Chapter 2 – Ur in Depth: The Ubaid, Uruk, and Jemdat Nasr Periods, the First and Second Dynasty, Akkadian Dominion

## Picking the Right Chronology

Before we take a look at Ur throughout the years of its existence, it's important to discuss chronology used throughout the book. Two widely accepted ways of dating events in early Mesopotamia are the so-called short and middle chronology. Naturally, there are others, such as the high, the ultra-high, and the ultra-short chronology, however those aren't that widely accepted in academic circles.

The middle chronology puts the date of the Babylonian king Hammurabi at 1792-1750 BC and the sack of Babylon at 1595 BC. The short chronology, on the other hand, places those dates at 1728-1686 BC for Hammurabi and 1531 BC for Babylon's demise. The "rule of thumb" is to merely add 64 years to a short chronology date and you'll get its middle chronology equivalent. This doesn't apply to any period after the Third Babylon Dynasty, however.

In this book, we opted for the scientifically more accepted middle chronology. It is backed by dendrochronological data, or data based on dating of tree rings, and is at the moment the most reliable chronology that historians use for this period.

## Ubaid Period

Archeologists speculate, as stated in the earlier chapter, that the first permanent settlement at Ur was somewhere around 3800 BC. This would place it directly within the last phase of what is called the Ubaid Period.

Before moving on, the name "Ubaid" should be explained. Namely, ancient peoples of Mesopotamia would normally take their refuse and accumulate it in one big pile. These piles are what we know today as "tells." One such tell, Tell al-`Ubaid, which lies west of Ur, has become an important site for exploring ancient Mesopotamian life. This tell was first worked by British archeologist and Egyptologist Dr. Henry Hall back in 1919, though most of the important work on it would come later, under Sir Charles Leonard Woolley in the early twenties, and end in the early thirties. Since then, this

place has remained a key research spot and numerous other excavations and work followed, and still occur to this day.

Extensive dating and excavations of numerous objects took place at Tell al-`Ubaid, and archeologists turned their attention to the various pottery found at the site. Thus, the overarching Ubaid Period was divided into four successive styles of pot making. They are largely known as Ubaid 0, Ubaid 1, Ubaid 2, and Ubaid 3/4. Some experts add another period, Ubaid 5, to this list, while splitting the fourth period into Ubaid 3 and Ubaid 4. This newest level would prove to be transitional, as all subsequent pottery goes into the so-called Uruk Period.

Ubaid pottery is distinctive for its coloration and design. At the time, most pottery smiths made pots by hand. However, there is some evidence of using a slow wheel, meaning that the site, as well as Ur, which is not far from the tell, had early forms of "industrialized" clay pot manufacturing. Earlier pots were made of greenish clay with decoration added in black or purple. Later, the smiths opted for a simpler, bolder form of decoration. Most of the pottery found is open, i.e., had no lids to speak of. At both Tell al-`Ubaid and at Eridu, archeologists found numerous bowls, cups, storage jars, and other similar containers. Dating all of this earthenware was difficult, and even with modern carbon-14 dating, the margin of error is as high as two millennia. It also doesn't help that some of these pots were found quite far from where they were originally buried or left.

However, Ubaid finds aren't limited to just pottery. As early as Woolley's excavations, archeologists found primitive tools made of baked clay or light stone, such as hoes, serrated flints, sickles, and stone axes. While they wouldn't cut sturdy wood, such as a metal ax would, these clay or stone tools were perfect for cutting reeds and softer wood that grew in this region, which was more than likely used for both housing and kindling.

We move from tools to clothing and personal adornments. Clothing is notoriously difficult to stay preserved for any number of years, so no real examples of clothing were located at Ubaid. However, there are clay spindle whorls, so there must have been an early form of clothing production there. One potential theory is that both linen and wool became important for clothing, but that wool came into prominence far later because, according to both records and archeological finds, more sheep were being herded as the years progressed in the area. There are also not a lot of examples of "jewelry" at the site, suggesting that the Ubaid people weren't particularly

into adorning themselves. A few beads and small disks were found, implying that there were ancient pre-Sumerians who wore these, and there has even been a discussion of possible tattooing or scarification rituals performed, but nothing about it is conclusive.

The origin of the early inhabitants at Tell al-`Ubaid is still debatable, though some researchers suggest that they came from Neolithic and Bronze Age sites such as Gonur Tepe or Anau in modern-day Turkmenistan. Most scientists agree that this early culture wasn't one of social stratification. The people that would later call themselves "black heads," i.e. Sumerians, living in the area were largely fishermen, hunters, agrarians, or craftsmen. The lack of imported materials (with some minor exceptions) suggests that people of Tell al-`Ubaid were pretty self-sufficient, that they didn't rely on foreign trade for survival. When excavating graves, Woolley and his successors came to the conclusion that the society as a whole didn't have classes, that they were mostly buried modestly with not a lot of pomp. However, the discovery of these graves definitely confirms one important detail. Even in this early stage of Mesopotamia, the inhabitants of the southern part of the Two Rivers Valley (or rather, of the area as a whole) had at least some idea of what the afterlife was like. In other words, they had a belief system, of which we know very little in terms of concrete details.

There are very few details of buildings and architecture of the early Ubaid Period. The later Ubaid Period, though, in different sites in South Mesopotamia, yielded a few interesting finds, largely of simple yet large houses with either rectangle or T-shaped central halls. With the square central hall houses, there were also additional rooms on the side, possible second floors, and roofs supported by two rows of square pillars. Houses with the T-shaped central hall contained two more sections, one being a smaller T-shaped chamber and another being rectangular. These types of houses were common for that period throughout Mesopotamia.

Houses weren't the only buildings of this period that were found. Eridu, an ancient city subservient to Ur at key points in its history, as well as Uruk, another important Sumerian city, both show traces of massive temples from the later Ubaid Period. Excavators found traces of these temples, and even with the little evidence they had available, they managed to sketch up a plan of these fascinating buildings.

This would be a good point to compare the Ubaid Period of North Mesopotamia to its Southern counterpart, where Ur used to be. Scientists of the field used to argue which region was more advanced. Based on what evidence we have, each region excelled in different things. Northern cities had more hard wood and could therefore build better boats or better temporary housing and/or shelters. In addition, they were using cylinder seals far earlier than the South as a means of marking property or general administration. The South, however, made more elaborate pottery and were experts when it came to fishing and making baked brick houses. As such, the items from the Ubaid Period native to the South, yet found in the North, might have just been a result of trade between the two. Some have suggested conquest, though this isn't as likely since we don't have any concrete evidence of a standing army for any of these early settlements. Naturally, ordinary migrations or even marriages could have contributed to either craftsmen moving up North and continuing their craft or citizens simply bringing their pottery with them.

*Tell al-`Ubaid, Iraq*[xxiii]

# The Uruk and Jemdat Nasr Periods

Judging Ur when it comes to these two periods is difficult, as there isn't much evidence within the city itself that would tell us anything of that era. We're talking about the era that comes right after the Ubaid Period, yet one that predates what is commonly known as the Early Dynastic Period. This

time is divided into two periods, both named after the locations where the evidence was excavated from. The first is the so-called Uruk Period, which immediately followed the Ubaid Period, or rather partially overlapped its last two centuries, starting circa 4000 BC and ending circa 3100 BC. As such, the best evidence of this culture can be found at Uruk itself. This is evident in every aspect of life; for instance, pottery was now being made more quickly and in larger quantities using a fast wheel. The so-called beveled rim bowls became the signature feature of the Uruk Period. But more than that, Uruk showed signs of more elaborate buildings, a harbor, numerous cylinder seals, imported raw materials, early prototypes of terraced temples which would eventually lead to larger, also terraced structures known as ziggurats, stone vessels, and, most importantly, the initial evidence of early writing. This writing, largely done in pictograms, was the predecessor to the cuneiform alphabet, which would become the gold standard of writing for many Mesopotamian civilizations.

The Jemdat Nasr Period followed, lasting from circa 3100 BC to circa 2900 BC, and this was when writing was beginning to take hold far more. Scribes were largely busy taking official notes on everyday business, such as trade and administration. Another major aspect of the Jemdat Nasr Period included painted pottery. This type of pottery was far more elaborate in terms of design and beauty when compared to its Uruk predecessors. However, it is important to note that this style of pottery was only found at places which appeared to belong to either wealthier people or temples or similar official buildings. This would mean that the everyday people probably still used simpler, less ornate earthenware.

The only thing that we can guess happened in Ur during the Uruk and the Jemdat Nasr periods is the importation of non-native raw materials, such as different metals, precious stones, etc. In addition, based on the burials that took place in Ur during that time, we can ascertain that they put substantial emphasis on burial customs as early as these two pre-dynastic periods. Most other information has to be speculated upon, based on the evidence found at other, nearby locations such as Uruk and Jemdat Nasr.

# Early Dynastic Ur – The First and Second Dynasty, and All in Between

Archeologically speaking, Ur has been in a state of historical obscurity and, possibly, political non-importance. However, by around 2700 BC, roughly a

century before archeologists speculate the First Dynasty of Ur reigned; it had grown into a full-fledged city-state with an important role among other more "famous" city-states. During his digs at Jemdat Nasr, Woolley uncovered numerous cylinder seals from this era, of which his team managed to decipher four as belonging to Ur, Nippur, Larsa, and Uruk (two additional seals are speculated to be those of Kesh and Zabalam though this is not certain). Nippur was already known as the sacred place of ancient Sumer, even though it didn't have any particular political supremacy over other cities throughout its long existence. As such, locating these cylinders in the same area would either imply that the cities had some sort of political alliance between themselves, or, more plausibly, that they brought small offerings to Nippur during major religious events.

One major shift in the culture of Ur, but also of South Mesopotamia in general, is the advent of writing. What started as pictograms during the Jemdat Nasr Period quickly gave way to the early cuneiform script, and an abundance of bureaucratic documents from that time gives us an idea to what extent the people of Ur actually used it. However, inscriptions were also used for other purposes. A ruler, for example, would want to propagandize his (rarely her) successes and achievements by having his name ingrained into an object, usually a brick or a stela. And, as it normally goes with ancient propaganda, it would be full of mythical, supernatural elements, as well as some good, old-fashioned self-aggrandizing. This practice was not going to go away for many millennia to follow, but it found its roots in the Early Dynastic South, Ur included. One such document that illustrates this "toying with the truth" by those of royal blood is the much-later composed Sumerian King List, which proved to be a useful tool for us to look at these periods, including this one. Examples of the Sumerian King List not being a particularly trustworthy document are numerous. There are kings in that list whose reigns go into tens of thousands of years, which is just impossible for normal human beings. In fact, even the more "plausible" reigns of 80 years of some kings are a stretch. Furthermore, entire lists of kings from certain cities were omitted from the list for political reasons, such as two entire dynasties of Lagash, which were contemporaries of some of the more famous dynasties that did make the list. On top of all of that, archeological evidence suggests that there were kings in nearly all cities of this time period that didn't make it on the list, again for unknown reasons, but likely because of negligence or

political malice on the part of those who commissioned the list to begin with.

It is this part, the part of certain kings not being on the list,that we turn to looking at Early Dynastic Ur. The Diyala Valley excavation site served archeologists in dividing up the period into four separate sub-phases: ED I, ED II, ED IIIa, and ED IIIb. These last two were roughly around 2600 BC, when Ur was starting its ascent to political dominance. The first kings of Ur that were listed on the King List, Mesannepadda and his son Aannepadda, are also the first rulers of Ur whose archeological data we have (to some extent) at the so-called Royal Cemetery. However, other people of noble birth, such as Meskalamdug, his possible wife Ninbanda, his son Akalamdug, along with two others suspected to be a queen and her consort or even a king, Puabi and Abargi, were found close to the two King List rulers. This find suggests that these men were either kings themselves who didn't make the list or just nobles that were outranked solely by a king. There were, of course, literally thousands of other graves, however it was difficult to date those particular graves with any kind of precision, let alone say with any certainty who the buried people were or even what particular caste of citizen they belonged to.

However, there was some evidence of ritual human sacrifice at some major burial sites. For instance, an entire row of soldiers and attendants was found at Abargi's grave, possibly to guard him and tend to him in the afterlife. These men were lined in an open rectangular shaft in front of the tomb, with a ramp that led down to them. Interestingly, a good deal of them show signs of non-natural, incited death. The same goes for buried priestesses located at similar graves. There were even people who were shown to be dressed by someone else after they had died hinting further that a ritual sacrifice took place at some point. A few of them might have even resisted this practice.

Interestingly enough, with all of the graves excavated, they seldom had corpses of children within them. Furthermore, not all bodies were buried the same way. A few were laid in wicker coffins, a few in clay coffins, and some were wrapped in what looked like matting. Each body showed evidence of being partially burned, possibly as part of a burial ritual, and there were even hints that people would leave their dead tributes in form of either food or crafted gifts. Thus far, no buildings were uncovered close to these graves that would imply that there was something similar to a chapel where the burial would go through the necessary rites, though the reason

behind this can be twofold. First, erosion could have done away with any structure easily. Second, most rulers made it a point to build religious structures on top of other torn down sacred places that existed there before. In fact, this can be seen at the famous ziggurat of Ur, which we will cover in a few chapters below.

# Sargon of Akkad and the Akkadian Dominion of Ur

If we exclude Eannatum, who might have ruled over the first real Sumerian-only empire, which he claimed encompassed all of the region, it was the mighty Sargon of Akkad who became history's first-known emperor in the real sense of that word. His reign over Sumerian cities lasted from 2334 BC to 2284 BC. Having been "found in the reed basket in a canal" like Moses (both of these stories are more legend than fact), this Semitic man grew up to become a cup-bearer of Ur-Zababa, a king who, according to the King List, belonged to the 4th Dynasty of Kish. After breaking away from his Sumerian lord, he took hold of Agade, or Akkad, a city whose real location is still somewhat disputed by archeologists. Very soon after, he would begin his conquest of the cities between the two rivers and would actually boast dominion from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. This included all the cities close to the Persian Gulf in the south of Mesopotamia, where Ur was.

Sadly, not much is known of Ur during this period of its existence. However, what is known tells us just how important Ur must have been to the new Semitic conquerors of the Sumerian lands. Sargon, at some point, managed to appoint his own daughter Enheduanna as the En of the city, a title meaning either high priest or high priestess, depending on the gender of the person chosen for the position. She was well known for her abundance of written works, making her possibly the world's first named author. Clay disks with her name which depict her doing priestly duties were found at the ruins of Giparu, a temple which at the time was an economic powerhouse in and of itself, meant to hold rich material goods of various kinds. Enheduanna actually remained in this position, with some minor turmoil, even after Sargon's death, when his sons Rimush and Manishtushu, and later his grandson Naram-sin, took control of the empire. Having a native Semitic high priestess in a Sumerian temple was a stroke of genius on Sargon's part, because it meant that he would win favor with the local

believers more easily and it would give him access to the temple's wealth to use at his disposal.

Buildings of this period are virtually non-existent, considering that they were all largely leveled by the succeeding Ur III rulers to make way for their own building projects. The same can be said of material finds, most of which were located in cemeteries by Woolley during his digs in the early twenties of the 20th century. The few graves that corresponded with the Akkadian Period don't show a lot of difference in terms of structure or burial rites, but there is one particular distinction. When compared to their First or Second Ur Dynasty counterparts, these graves are far less richly furnished and with less evidence of wealthy offerings. Naturally, this is also difficult to ascertain, since the vast majority of graves in general were robbed early on in ancient Mesopotamia, but based on inscriptions and the very makeup of the graves—a distinct lack of precious stones, wealthy materials, etc.—speaks volumes about Ur's economic status at the time. Due to constant wars, trade must have taken a nosedive, leaving the people of Ur with fewer raw materials to make headdresses, clothing, jewelry, figurines, and pottery. This actually affected even the tools buried with the bodies, as the alloys used to craft them are not as fine as the earlier weapons found in Ur's graves. Another notable change was the different cylinder seal styles. These new seals started depicting scenes from stories and mythology, including gods, demigods, and heroes wrestling dangers such as wild animals or other demigods. Statues and stelas from this period also show how frequent these motifs were in art, a notable change from the earlier periods.

# Gutian Rule and the Restoration of Sumerian Rulers

Shu-turul would prove to be the last Akkadian emperor before the empire inevitably collapsed under the invasion of the Gutian hordes from the Zagroz Mountains in circa 2154 BC. Gutians would soon establish their own dominion over Sumer, but this proved to be an unstable one, considering their own nature. Namely, it is speculated that the Gutians couldn't maintain dominion over all of the Sumerian cities since their entire culture was nomadic and not used to the highly urban, highly bureaucratic way of life already well-established in nearly every urban center in Sumer, which included all Semitic cities such as Akkad. As such, every governor in

various cities would effectively act as an independent ruler, which actually gave rise to such important rulers like Gudea of Lagash and one of his predecessors, his father-in-law Ur-Bau. Ur-Bau actually managed to appoint his daughter as a high priestess of Ur at the time, giving her the name of Enannepadda, a position famously held by Sargon's daughter Enheduanna many years before her. Gudea did not exert much influence over Ur, but another ruler soon would, a ruler credited for defeating the Gutians and again giving Sumer back to the Sumerians, the first and only ruler of the Fifth Dynasty of Uruk, Utu-hengal.

Utu-hengal would go on to defeat the final Gutian king, Tirigan, whom the King List mentions as having ruled only 40 days. In doing this, Utu-hengal had effectively deposed all Gutians from places of prominence, though at the time this might have been an easy task due to their already diminished influence over the cities. During his seven-year reign, Utu-hengal would take control of several southern cities, Ur included; in fact, he became so influential in these cities that he had the ability to appoint governors himself. One of these governors, Ur-nammu, held dominion over Ur, though in all likelihood he wasn't born there. This wouldn't matter much, for Ur-nammu would go on to depose Utu-hengal and transfer all of the power from Uruk to Ur, starting the most prosperous legendary period in the city's history. Utu-hengal's legacy would continue to live on though, since one of his daughters would become Ur-nammu's wife, giving birth to his son and subsequent emperor of Ur, Shulgi.

# Chapter 3 – The Third Dynasty of Ur

There is no debate when it comes to what the high point of Ur's existence was. In fact, a case can be made that this same period could very well be the high point of Sumerian culture in general. A rough estimate of when Ur's dominion over nearly all of Sumer takes place is between 2112 and 2004 BC.

The famed Third Dynasty of Ur spanned five rulers. During the hundred odd years of their collective reign, the city became the capital of the entire Sumerian Mesopotamia. In fact, just under Shulgi, Ur held dominion over many prominent cities, at least 21 to be precise. Uruk, Nippur, Babylon, Lagash, and Shuruppak are just a few examples of prominent cities under Shulgi's direct rule (though it should be noted that these cities still had local governors and not all of them were directly under Ur; they could merely have been vassal states of sorts). His successors Amar-sin and Shu-sin would submit five more cities to Ur's control later. At least 215 governors from these cities pledged loyalty to the rulers, though the true number is more likely way higher than this, considering there is evidence of governors pledging their services to a ruler whose name is lost to us.

Trade increased immensely with other areas on all four sides of the empire. Furthermore, it was a time of great building and rebuilding, where entire temple complexes (with individual temples), walls, and official houses came one after the other, both in Ur and in its subservient neighboring cities. Nippur, the holiest place of Sumer, came under direct control of the city, and nearly all of the rulers self-stylized their names as "rulers of all Sumer and Akkad, kings of all four corners of the world," even if that supposed "four corners of the world" reign did significantly go down with the final ruler of the dynasty.

Conquest and building weren't the only achievements of Ur III. Numerous canals were dug throughout the empire, providing water to the temples and the citizens, as well as the agricultural areas surrounding the city walls. Agriculture itself became more centralized, and the economy was booming. Literature and arts were also on the rise.

Naturally, this dynasty, like all others, faced problems. Most of these were related to outside nomadic tribes, such as the Amorites and Elamites constantly invading and sacking the citizenry. Eventually, it is these tribes

that would put this dynasty to rest, but for the duration of the empire, each ruler managed to stave them off and even subdue a substantial number of them. The bigger the empire got though, the more difficult it became to defend, and ultimately it was the combination of these invasions and local infighting that terminated the greatest ruling dynasty Ur had ever had.

The five rulers that make up the Third Dynasty are as follows: Ur-nammu, Shulgi, Amar-sin, Shu-sin, and Ibbi-sin. From the very names of these rulers, i.e. from adding the Akkadian "sin" at the end of their names (the word being an Akkadian equivalent to the moon god's name, Nanna), we can see that they were no longer "pure-bred" Sumerians, but were rather mixed as a result of many years of Akkadian rule. This will be true even of the following two dynasties, Isin and Larsa, who styled themselves as inheritors of the Sumerian dominion, though they would never control anywhere near the same area as the dynasty they inherited did.

Each year a king of the Third Dynasty ruled had a specific name, based on whatever the major event was, or even what the major event was a year or two before that year. These so-called "named years" give us a little inside look at the inner workings of each individual ruler of this dynasty.

# Ur-nammu

Possibly originating from Uruk, Ur-nammu became the governor of Ur while Utu-hengal held power over Sumer, defeating the Gutians and restoring territories fully to the Sumerians (though cities such as Lagash were already de facto independent during this period). After his short reign, Utu-hengal was rather abruptly replaced by his successor, Ur- Nammu; popular opinion, even back then, was that Utu-hengal died in battle. Based on the aforementioned middle chronology, Ur-nammu ruled Sumer from 2112 to 2095 BC, a total of 18 years. However, he still didn't style himself "king of Sumer and Akkad" until roughly the sixth year of his rule, when he made his famous trip to Nippur. But even before he did that, he achieved some major successes worth mentioning. He installed one of his daughters as a high priestess of the god Nanna, the titular deity at Ur. This was not unusual, as Sargon had done this before with his own daughter. Moreover, Ur-nammu possibly raided Lagash of its grain, staved off the Gutians, and began major constructions and reconstructions, such as the "wall of Ur" and numerous temples—one at Ur, one at Eridu, and one at Ku'ar. This would

suggest strongly that these cities were under his direct rule as early as the fifth year of his reign.

It is important to note, before we move on to the future events of his reign, that whenever a source states that a ruler "built walls," it wasn't necessarily the outer city walls that the inscription is talking about. They could have been merely temenos (temple complex) walls, as evidence exists in form of bricks and stones which the builders marked as being commissioned by the kings themselves.

Five years in, and Ur-Nammu was already declared "king of the four quarters." Yet, he did not sit idly when he acquired his dominion of Nippur. In fact, the very next year he began massive rebuilding projects including the temple complex of Ur called Etemenniguru. This included building the now-iconic Ziggurat of Ur, which his son Shulgi would finish years later. There will be more discussions of this ziggurat in a later chapter.

Ur-nammu's next year was an even busier one. Besides reestablishing trade with Magan, he also promulgated his code of law, as rulers such as Urukagina had done before him. After this, he went about incorporating numerous territories into his nation, largely by conquest, but at times merely by trade or negotiations. After all, there were a lot of city-states that would welcome a ruler who had not been of a Gutian origin and each area that was under Ur-nammu at the time was going through a period of rebuilding and prosperity.

Uruk gaining Ur-nammu's daughter as a high-priestess of its Inanna temple further proves his dominion over the city, but it also provides more evidence that he might have been a native of this city. This would not be the only thing he did for Uruk during his reign, though it is a notable gesture that would give Uruk stronger legitimacy, even as a vassal city of Ur.

Ur-nammu was well known for his rebuilding endeavors. After having constructed a ritualistic chariot for Ninlil, he constructed a few temples, such as one for the goddess Ninsuna in Ur, the foundations of a temple for Ningublaga whose location is still unknown, and the great wall of Ur. He was likely the ruler who first built the Giparku, or the residence of the high priestess, in Ur, as well as the Enunmah, the so-called "House of Plenty," a treasury and a storehouse of sorts for the grain. Iturungal and A-Nintu were two canals he also dug, irrigating more land in the process. On top of that, he also appointed another high priestess, one for the god Ishkur. Before his

death, Ur-nammu waged a few dangerous war campaigns in the Diyala region, most likely against the remaining Gutians and the growing Elamite threat. Sumerian folklore and tradition speaks of his son avenging his father who fell in battle against an Elamite king. Whatever the case, the first ruler of Ur III perished, and his son was to take up the throne.

*Foundation figure of Ur-nammu holding a basket, Metropolitan Museum of Art*[xxiv].

# Shulgi

The son of Ur-nammu, Shulgi took the throne in 2094 and died around 2047 BC, giving him the longest reign of the five rulers at 46 years. Inheriting the empire from his mighty and capable father was no small feat, and it would be a far grander task to actually "fill his shoes," if not surpass him entirely. However, Shulgi was arguably even more successful than his father, having himself finished the great ziggurat and continuing the great tradition of successful trade and abundant agricultural work.

His first few years were modest, and he was known to have made a lapis lazuli throne for the wind god Enlil at his temple at Nippur and moved on to constructing a temple kitchen building in the temple of the goddess

Ninshubur. After a year of activity which archeology has yet to uncover, Shulgi dedicated at least three years to construct a temple of the god Ninurta, restoring the city of Der in the meantime. The following years were of even vaster importance for Shulgi, as he commissioned the building of a Nippur road, after which he took a notable trip from Ur to Nippur and back, thus earning him the title of the monarch of all Sumer and Akkad. Soon after, he constructed a large boat dedicated to the goddess Ninlil, meant to transport statues of Enlil and Ninlil during their cult festivals. Their statues would not be the only ones transported. In fact, during Shulgi's reign alone, at least eight statues found their way back to their respective temples in different cities. Shulgi did his own fair share of building and rebuilding after his own trip to Nippur. It started with his "Mountain House," the Ehursag, his royal palace and personal place of residence at Ur. Some scientists speculate that this particular house was first commissioned by Ur-nammu and merely finished by Shulgi, but with no conclusive evidence for this. A few years later, an "ice house" or "frost house" followed, a building where ice was stored. Next came the commissioning of the bed of Ninlil. And then, many years later, Shulgi built the wall of Ur and the temple of the god Nergal. His reign also included rebuilding entire cities, such as Ezen-Kaskal and Puzrish-Dagan. Infrastructure flourished under him, as he had built and rebuilt numerous roads across his domain. Interestingly, he was probably the first ruler to appoint the construction of an inn.

Much like Ur-nammu, his son also appointed several high priestesses. Archeologists managed to uncover that he personally appointed three, two of which resided in Ur. One of his daughters, Liwwir-Mittashu or Nialimmidashu, was even elevated into a "queen" of a local polity called Marhashi by way of marriage.

But Shulgi's domain would see a lot more wars than Ur-nammu's did. After appointing his daughter the queen of Marhashi, Shulgi began conscripting local men into lancers. Most of the years that followed had Shulgi fighting various opponents, destroying Der (which he had rebuilt mere two years prior), Karahar, Simurrum, Harshi, and Anshan. Some of these cities were destroyed more than once, indicating multiple campaigns and shaky periods of peace, and it was two years after the destruction of Der that Shulgi proclaimed himself a god. Wars continued after a few years of relative peace, and soon enough Shulgi would sack Shasru, wage wars against tribes

such as Urbillum, Simurrum, and Lullubu, then sack Karahar, followed by destroying Kimash and Hurti and their surrounding lands. Despite not being listed as one of the "named" years, there was also a notable period when Shulgi waged war against the Shimashki Dynasty of Elam. It was probably during these attacks that Shulgi eventually lost his life, making room for his son to take his place.

# Amar-sin

Erroneously called Bur-Sin originally and sometimes called Amar-Suena, Amar-sin ruled from 2046 to 2038 BC, for a total of nine years. During those nine years, Amar-sin managed to appoint numerous high priestesses throughout his territory, and he would further increase said territory with successful military campaigns to the north. In total, five women were appointed high priestesses during Amar-sin's rule. One of them was elevated to this position the same year the king issued the creation of an elaborate throne for the god Enlil.

Yet none of this happened before Amar-sin's first successful military campaign where he eliminated the Urbillum tribe. This would not be his last successful battle, as he would wage war against the cities of Shashrum and Shuruthum several years later, destroying the former at least twice. The sacking of Huhnuri also followed, marking his last major campaign, although he did also suppress several attempts at an uprising.

In terms of construction, we know that Amar-sin started construction of a ziggurat at Eridu which remains unfinished. Beyond that, he also constructed the Edublalmah at Ur, a gateway to the eastern corner of the Ur ziggurat terrace. A much larger undertaking was the digging and maintenance of the vast Amar-sin Canal. It connected the Euphrates and the Iturungal rivers. The canal was one of the three main watercourses. The other two were a channel from Bad-tibira to Nippur and a separate Iturungal canal.

Sadly, Amar-sin's agricultural efforts weren't that successful. One of the reasons why Eridu's ziggurat remained unbuilt was the massive salinity of the area. The salty soil made it impossible to maintain crops properly throughout the year, which is why Amar-sin opted to leave Eridu unirrigated and its soil "dead".

And speaking of death, Amar-sin's death has an interesting tale to it. Apparently, according to Sumerian legend, Amar-sin's death was

prophesied as him being gutted by a bull. However, he died from a foot infection after a snake bit him. It's interesting to note that Amar-sin was the first ruler to immediately assume the title "king of all Sumer and Akkad" and "king of the four quarters" without specifically having to travel to Nippur. This might go to show how powerful and influential Ur had become in and of itself during Ur-nammu and Shulgi.

*Foundation figure of Amar-sin holding a basket, Louvre*[xxv]

# Shu-sin

The son of Amar-sin, Shu-sin, also ruled for nine years, from 2037 to 2029 BC. These nine years contained a more or less even divide between the monarch's military campaigns and his construction work, with surprisingly no high priestess appointments to speak of.

Unlike Amar-sin, Shu-sin largely led defensive wars, though not all of them were of that nature. Early in his reign, Shu-sin would sack Simanum in a momentous military campaign. He would go on to wage war against several Amorite lands, such as Tidnum and Iamadium. Close to the end of his reign, he would wage war against the land of Zabshali and destroy it.

These constant battles against the Amorite tribes must have been exhausting to the fourth ruler of the Ur III Dynasty which is why he commissioned the

building of a massive wall around the city. We know for a fact that this wall had a specific purpose to prevent Amorite tribes from plundering the city because it specifically had that name, “It keeps Tidnum at a distance.” However, he did commission other building projects as well, including a boat for the god Enki prior to his campaign against Simanum, a statue at Nippur likely dedicated to Inanna, a holy stele for Enlil and Ninlil, as well as a “magur boat” for the same divine pair, and, during his final year, a temple at Umma dedicated to their local deity Sara. Soon after he would die and, according to some sources, get buried in Uruk rather than Ur, with his son Ibbi-sin attending the funeral with his wife.

# Ibbi-sin

The last monarch of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Ibbi-sin, ruled from 2028 to 2004 BC, for a grand total of 24 years. Despite likely being more Akkadian than Sumerian, he would be the last “native” ruler of Sumer. While the following Isin and Larsa Dynasties technically carried on ruling as “natives” themselves, declaring themselves “kings of the four corners”, their territory and reach was nowhere near as significant as the one this last Ur dynasty had, and this region would not see any form of unification until Hammurabi’s conquest of it many years later.

Ibbi-sin’s reign is probably the single most turbulent one of any post-Gutian rule monarch. Wars had been waged far long before he ascended the throne, but it was during his reign that Ur’s opponents finally started getting the upper hand on Ur. Both the Elamites and the Amorites would regularly attack Ur, causing Ibbi-sin to commission the building of two great walls at Nippur and Ur, though these were likely just reinforcements or reconstructions of already existing walls at both cities. No direct evidence, such as inscriptions or seal impressions, exists of Ibbi-sin either building or rebuilding either wall, though this lack of data during this particular period is not uncommon, especially if the cities he had rebuilt suffered from a massive invasion. Ibbi-sin underwent military campaigns as well, attacking and sacking Simurrum in the early years of his reign, then fighting the Huhnuri of Anshan, and later going after the cities of Susa, Adamdun, and the Awan region (though none of these last three claimed campaigns is covered by any archeological evidence we have). Evidently, at least according to Ibbi-sin, the Amorites succumbed to him during the eighteenth

year of his reign, but considering how frequently both tribes attacked him in the coming years, this was likely just propaganda at the time.

Ibbi-sin did some minor construction and reconstruction, like a storehouse for two goddesses, Ninlil and Inanna, though most of his achievements commission-wise were related to objects. He is noted for having fashioned a throne for Nanna at Ur, followed by a lyre or drum for Inanna. He also commonly installed high priestesses in various cities, such as Eridu, Urum, Ur, and Nippur, as well as marrying off his daughter to a governor of Zabshali. These installments stop, however, roughly halfway through his reign, with the other half consumed with wars and sorties.

It's fascinating to learn just how early in Ibbi-sin's reign the other cities started to secede and act independently. Eshnunna, which was an Ur protectorate since at least Shulgi, stopped dating their years based on Ibbi-sin's reign during his second year in power. Susa was next to go the following year, and then Lagash, Umma, and even Nippur, all of them gone by the seventh year of Ibbi-sin's reign. Judging by the frequent uprisings in largely Amorite and Elamite southern cities, it's safe to say that they were declaring their own independence a bit more openly than the cities before them. Due to constant wars, wall reconstruction, and conscription, trade all but ceased in Ur. No merchant would dare venture into Elamite-infested lands, and Ibbi-sin kept raising taxes on his constituents. By the end of his rule, Ur was a mere shell of its former self.

However, constant intrusions by the barbarians on all sides and the lack of viable trade weren't the only problems Ibbi-sin had to face. More and more governors were pledging fealty to either separatist local rulers or the invading forces. Based on research, the fall of Ur can be divided into no less than three phases. The first phase included the rise of an upstart governor called Ishbi-erra of Isin. In correspondence with him, Ibbi-sin showed open concern over how the governor of Isin acted. Large portions of what he imported Ishbi-erra kept in Isin, sending the king whatever remained, all under the guise of safekeeping and defending the goods from the invading tribes. It's more than likely that Ishbi-erra actually conspired with the Elamites in order to dispose of Ibbi-sin and take control of Sumer.

This particular way of thinking is supported by the so-called second phase of Ur's fall. Another correspondence occurred, this time between Ibbi-sin and his Kazallu-based governor, Puzur-shulgi, where the governor begs the king to help him against Ishbi-erra's advances. In yet another bit of

correspondence, the king begs probably the same governor, under the new name Puzur-numushda, not to join Ishbi-erra, but to remain loyal. Within this phase, we can see that there's utter anarchy in the waning Sumerian Empire, where local governors claimed independence, pledged allegiance to Ishbi-erra, or died in battle against the unrelenting Elamites, now joined by the resurfacing Gutians. It's safe to say that Ur's territorial reach now only went as far as the city limits themselves.

The third and final phase saw two events occur. The first was the sacking of Ur by Elamites and Gutians, with Ibbi-sin's unceremonious capture. The deposed king was most likely taken to Anshan and executed, while his city was destroyed to such an extent that it went on to be recorded in a now-famous Sumerian poem "The Lamentation over the City of Ur." So vast was the ruination of this city that the poet likened it to the gods themselves deciding to abandon the place, deeming it fit to end when it did. The second event was the eventual rise of Isin as a moderately dominant force in the region. Whatever the case, the Third Dynasty of Ur died with Ibbi-sin, and Ur never recovered the glory it had during its long, prosperous reign.

# Chapter 4 – Post-Ur III: The Isin-Larsa Period, Babylonian Rule, Kassite Rule, Abandonment of the City

## Isin-Larsa Period in Ur

As stated, the last years of Ibbi-sin would prove to be disastrous for the city of Ur. This emperor had to deal with at least four separate threats at once. The first two were the constant advances by nomadic Elamite and Amorite tribes, later joined by the Gutians. Elamites in particular would eventually dethrone Ibbi-sin and take him captive. The fourth threat, more than likely linked to the first three, was the usurpation of Ishbi-erra, the founder of the Isin Dynasty. Possibly an Elamite himself, Ishbi-erra lived and acted in the lesser-known town of Isin and established dominion there. He then added a few other cities to his domain by means of diplomacy and claimed kingship over a territory roughly the size of Sargon's, even though this was more than likely not the case. Ur, of course, fell under the Isin dominion shortly after its sacking, but would not stay there for long. Soon after Isin's expansion, another city, Larsa, began to rise in power, very soon eclipsing the rulers of Isin. Considering how influential these two dynasties were and considering how they were the only "Sumerian" dynasties that remained in power before Hammurabi's conquest of the region, this period in history is rightfully called the Isin-Larsa Period.

The "Sumerian" adjective is not in quotation marks for nothing; after many years of Akkadian rule, most people adopted Akkadian as their second official language. Namely, most laws, administrative papers, and public announcements were now being written bilingually in both Sumerian and Akkadian. As early as even Utu-hengal, most officials spoke Akkadian and Sumerian was merely there as the lingua franca of the region, a language of fine arts, culture, and religion, much like Latin would become for the Catholics a few millennia later. As such, the Isin and Larsa Dynasties are Sumerian in name only. The entire area would soon give way to Semitic peoples with similar languages; also, genetically and culturally speaking, most "pure" Sumerians would have largely died out at this point. With that in mind, we can rightfully say that this particular period in history was the last one to see Sumerians as a distinct ethnic group before they inevitably

assimilated with the upcoming largely Semitic peoples that controlled the area centuries and millennia after.

Both Isin and Larsa rulers attempted to do some rebuilding in the city once the Elamite threat had subsided. Sin-Iddinam, for instance, had done some building within the site known as Diqdiqqah during his reign over Larsa. Within this space is the so-called Treasury of Sin-Iddinam. This huge and spacious building was probably used to store grain and other riches under the Larsa dominion within Ur. However, the very suburb itself, Diqdiqqah, most likely dates to Ur-nammu's reign, and judging on the brickwork and what little evidence there is, it was rebuilt and restructured even by Sin-Iddinam's successors.

And speaking of his successors, Warad-Sin, the second-to-last Larsa king, built a massive defense bastion, as well as a gateway, to the ziggurat palace in Ur. His successor, as well as the last "Sumerian" king before Hammurabi's conquest, Rim-Sin, had restored no less than two temples, one dedicated to Enki and the other probably to Ningizida.

Despite Ur's destruction and the deposition of its titular dynasty, the kings of both Isin and Larsa realized the importance of the city itself, largely due to its piers and access to sea routes, which in turn meant that it was capable of massive trade. In fact, there is evidence of a slight revival at Ur, evidence that largely consists of reinforced and rebuilt houses and public buildings, such as shops, ancient equivalents of fast-food stores, and even a brothel. In addition, there was an odd emergence of neighborhood chapels, with areas for statues of presumably gods or deified kings. A few of those include the Nin-Shubur Chapel, the Hendursag Chapel, and the Ram Chapel. These chapels often had family tombs directly beneath them, housing corpses of family members that had passed on. A clear sign of the lack of progress after the fall of Ur is in these graves—rarely any of them had rich furnishings and offerings, suggesting that the people didn't have the means to get the raw materials to make tributary burial goods. This, of course, contrasts with what came immediately after, i.e. the booming trade that came out of the city under both Isin and Larsa, even more so than it was under Ur III. There is even a possibility that traders from other places, notably a polity called Dilmun whose location still eludes archeologists (though they think it might be in modern-day Bahrain), would find permanent residence at Ur. And considering how often Ur and Dilmun did business, this is not that surprising.

Other than merchants, other craftsmen and businessmen lived in Ur during the Isin-Larsa Period. Evidence tells us of landowners, financiers, potters, bakers, etc. Based on the housing most of these people had, it's safe to say that the local economy consisted of somewhat self-sufficient actors. In other words, merchants could very well get wealthy or poor on their own accord, without much obligation to the central court or the temple.

Most of these findings were located in the so-called AH neighborhood during Woolley's excavations, and evidence shows us that this particular neighborhood had a vibrant, socially mixed community that didn't want for too many things. The neighborhood is located in the south-east part of Ur, outside of the temple complex, close to a different neighborhood which dates later, from the Neo-Babylonian era. Interestingly, Woolley named the site AH, which is short for "Abraham's Housing."

While not as rich as the Ur III neighborhood might have been, it definitely shows some sign of progress after the sacking by the Elamites. Materials such as lapis lazuli, carnelian, ivory, tin, and most of all copper were imported regularly for housing and other projects and later traded within the city itself. Coupled with the rebuilding projects that were popping up every now and again, this surge in trade would signal the first proper revival of the city in an attempt to restore it to its former glory. An attempt that would be thwarted with the coming of the Babylonians.

As stated earlier, Rulers of both Isin and Larsa incorporated Ur into their own lands, though they most likely did it through diplomacy. Each governor of the city was appointed by the central ruler and he had to pay an annual tax. Other than that, the rulers of these two dynasties didn't really have a lot of negative impact on the city itself. In fact, they went out of their way to treat it with the reverence it had during its celebrated Ur III era. This will be something that nearly none of the subsequent rulers would attempt to repeat within the city itself.

# Early Babylonian Ur

Rim-Sin, the last of the Larsa kings, fell in battle against Hammurabi in 1763 BC, according to the middle chronology. In turn, Hammurabi became the ruler of nearly the whole of South Mesopotamia, which very much included Ur. While the city suffered harsh devastation, Hammurabi still ruled over a moderately inhabited city where he set up a victory stele of his success in the city and built a canal to irrigate Ur a few years later. There

are even records of Hammurabi praying in the temple to the moon god Nanna, a practice no ruler after him will repeat. His son, on the other hand, called Samsu-Iluna, wasn't as accommodating with the city. During a rebellion by one Rim-Sin II, Samsu-Iluna sacked the whole city, burning entire houses and neighborhoods and killing nearly every opponent. The canal was also destroyed, leaving the city virtually dead for at least a century after his attack.

Babylon held control over most of the Mesopotamian cities, and just like nearly every ruler before them, they had problems with the nomadic tribes that would descend from the mountainous regions and perform regular raids. Samsu-Iluna, in particular, had to deal with the threat of the Kassites, raiders from the east. But Kassites were not the worst threat to Babylon in the coming decades. In fact, the threat that would eventually end the First Babylonian Dynasty was a different tribe, the Hittites. During the reign of the last Babylonian king in this dynasty, Samsu-Ditana, the Hittites had been regularly attacking the city. It was in 1595 BC that the Hittite king Murshilis raided Babylon, leaving it in ruins, but he did not conquer it. This was the year Samsu-Ditana presumably died and the year of ultimate humiliation for his dying empire—in his raid, Murshilis took the statues of Marduk, the titular city deity, along with Samsu-Ditana's consort Sarpatinum, to his own capital. This effectively ended any influence Babylon had over Mesopotamia, including Ur which was far from all of this and likely deteriorating during its century of archeological silence.

# Kassite Ur

A tribe probably from the Zagros Mountains, the Kassites became a major player on the Mesopotamian political stage roughly around the time of Hammurabi's reign. Both he and his son Samsu-Iluna deflected their attacks successfully, as did some of their successors. However, the Kassites kept growing stronger, eventually establishing themselves as the conquerors of Mesopotamia and defenders against the Hittites. The Hittite dominion over Babylon did destroy the central power of the city, but some Babylonian governors made their way to the south, around Ur, and established their own Sealand Dynasty. This wouldn't last, as the Kassites grew so powerful they eventually claimed Babylon and declared it their capital. Decades later, they would build a different city, Dur-Kurigalsu, and declare it their new capital in lieu of Babylon, which still retained its importance with the

invaders. Soon enough, the Kassites would engage in military campaigns in the south against the Sealand kings and eventually reached Ur, adding it to their list of conquered territories.

Dur-Kurigalsu got his name from a prominent king of the Kassites, Kurigalsu the 1st. This king in particular is important to Ur because it was only during his reign, somewhere before 1439 BC, that the city was once again undergoing renovation. Unfortunately, the evidence of his work in the city is minor, but it exists as a testament to Ur as a city surviving its original Sumerian inhabitants well after their demise.

Kurigalsu namely worked within the temenos, or the temple area of the city, though it's unsure if he actually did any work on the famed ziggurat. He managed to rebuild an important temple of the goddess Ningal, the spouse of Nanna, the titular Ur deity. In the same manner he rebuilt the temenos walls, reinforcing them. The home of the high priestess, the famed Giparku from the Ur III period, was also rebuilt under Kurigalsu's commission. However, his restoration of Edublalmah, a monumental gate whose purpose was to dispense justice to citizens, built under Amar-sin centuries before, proved to be some of his most impressive work. He expanded it, reinforced its walls, added T-shaped grooves on the outside of it, and to top it off, he added a staircase to access it. Next to the Edublalmah, Kurigalsu also restored the treasury, or the Enunmah, and further restored a temple which was dedicated to Ningizzida. All of these restoration projects tell us that Ur had been an important religious and administrative center at this time, despite its centuries of waning political influence. Of course, Ur never did recover its commercial and administrative force, even under Kurigalsu's meticulous rebuilding projects.

Another period of mediocrity followed after the end of Kurigalsu's reign. The Kassites were slowly losing power to the Assyrians, and while they kept having numerous kings in their waning years, these kings didn't hold a lot of sway over the land. A possible interpretation is that Ur fell under the Sealand Dynasty in the meantime, a dynasty of rulers who were also known as Chaldeans. The region itself would gain the name Chaldea between the tenth and the sixth century BC, and it is probably where the name "Ur of the Chaldees" originated from in the Hebrew Bible. All in all, with the Assyrian dominance of the region, Ur began crumbling financially and administratively again. The Assyrians held sway over both the Tigris and the Euphrates valleys, effectively controlling all water routes. This meant

that they could more easily import raw materials from places further from the Persian Gulf. Ur's major selling point, the fact that it had always been a busy port with lots of trading traffic, was diminished, and the city began its long, arduous decline yet again.

During Ashurbanipal, the most famed Assyrian ruler, the empire held sway over nearly the entire region, with their main centers being in the north. However, Assyrians had the ability to install governors in the southern cities as well, which is when Ur became somewhat prominent again. One local governor, Sinbalasu-iqbi, decided to work on rebuilding the entire city. Sadly, he chose poor materials, and as such, his efforts did not result in much. However, they did leave rather notable marks for archeological research. We know that he did major restoration work at the Edublalmah courtyard by cleaning it up and adding a whole new building to it. He bragged about installing a large door at the shrine, which is of course gone with no real trace other than a reused Kassite boundary marker that served as a pivot.

The Giparku also saw major restoration under Sinbalasu-iqbi. Numerous Assyrian figurines, largely used for burial ceremonies, were found buried under the rubble of the building material he used to restore the high priestess' home. Other work of Sinbalasu-iqbi included revetment and restoration of the temenos wall and building of a temple dedicated to the goddess Ningal, the consort of the moon god Nanna.

As was the case with Kurigalsu and the Kassite rule of the city, this new era of Ur rebuilding under Sinbalasu-iqbi would come to a halt. Ashurbanipal would soon die, leaving his empire without a proper heir. Nobody could take his place, and so the power over the Mesopotamian cities again returned to Babylon. This shift would soon have Ur go through its possibly last major period of restoration before its ultimate demise.

## Neo-Babylonian Ur

Late seventh and early sixth century BC was the time of Neo-Babylonian "Renaissance," in a sense. In 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar II, the second ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty, took the throne and, until his death in 562, brought Babylon to new heights which his successors couldn't match. Like many great rulers before him, he was more than just a conqueror. During his reign, he restored many temples, walls, and official buildings throughout his empire, and it just so happens that some of that restoration

took place at Ur. Now “officially” Chaldean in name, Ur was a shadow of its former glory. The Early Babylonian, Kassite, and Assyrian times were long gone, and its former glory was just part of myths and legends now. This was evident in the poor state of the temenos and its surrounding wall. Nebuchadnezzar took to repairing the wall as fast as possible with some notable changes, like allowing it to enclose a far larger area and giving it a total thickness of roughly 11 meters, or a little over 36 feet (however, there was an empty room in between, meaning the wall itself was sectioned on the inside and was, to an extent, hollow). The king also commissioned for the total repaving and reflooring of the Nanna Court, which he made level with the ziggurat upper terrace. There are even scholarly hypotheses that Nebuchadnezzar did some repairs on the ziggurat itself, though not enough evidence was found to support that.

Yet, it wasn’t Nebuchadnezzar that brought about the biggest repairs and restorations to Ur. That honor belongs to a later ruler, the sixth and final king of the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty, Nabonidus. During his reign, he more or less left all political affairs to his son, Belshazzar, while he either went on war campaigns or restored temples where he regularly prayed. He was originally from Harran, a city where the belief in the moon god, Sin (in Sumerian, Nanna) was strong. Harran was, in fact, like a “sister city” of Ur in that regard. It is precisely because of his strong beliefs that Nabonidus opted to leave the capital for no less than a decade, leaving his son in charge, so he could restore numerous temples and deal with the religious aspect of his empire.

One of his most prominent acts is raising the cult of Nanna-Sin to a higher rank with those of other gods. Once that was over with, he set about restoring Ur, which he personally held in as high a regard as Harran. The ziggurat underwent a major overhaul to the point where Nabonidus cleared up everything done by prior kings, Nebuchadnezzar included, so he could build the canonical, “proper” ziggurat. He kept the base originally commissioned by Ur-nammu as well as its stairways. All of these features were already over a thousand years old at this point. The entire ground level, as well as the stair level, was raised by about one meter up, and the stairs were repaired. There was also a major reconstruction of the first-floor gatehouse, which included the pylons erected all the way back when Ur-nammu was first building the structure. During his reconstruction, Nabonidus was looking for Ur III inscriptions on the brickwork, partly to

quote them for his own foundation cylinders in the ziggurat and partly because he had developed a bit of a habit of excavating relics of the past. In a sense, Nabonidus was becoming the first ever archeologist.

Nabonidus added two more structures to the ziggurat. The first of the two was most likely a shrine to the moon god. The other one had the odd name "Boat shrine," and its purpose is still unknown today to scholars. Aside from these two structures, Nabonidus also repaired the temple dedicated to Ningal, which was apparently built originally by Sinbalasu-iqbi. Not only did Nabonidus rebuild this temple, but he also embellished it further without changing the design a whole lot. Moving away from the ziggurat, but still staying within the temenos, Nabonidus also restored the three buildings important to the temple complex, namely the Enunmah, the Edublalmah, and the Giparku. An important detail to note here is that Nabonidus appointed his daughter, Belshaltinannar, as a high priestess of Ur and though she had the restored Giparku to live in, she got a different temple built to live in per her father's commission. The Giparku itself was sub-sectioned into several rooms, likely used as a scribe school for boys, yet it's what's under two of these rooms that fascinated archeologists. Hidden away were objects from various periods of Ur's history, most likely collected by Belshaltinannar, making her the second proto-archeologist in known history, right after Nabonidus, insofar that they both loved collecting object from former rulers of Ur. Her own palace was across from an unnamed north harbor temple, which was outside of the temenos walls and likely first built by Sinbalasu-iqbi and retooled by Nebuchadnezzar, though the former claim cannot be proven with certainty. The temple still baffles archeologists because we don't know what its purpose was, nor why it was built there. Belshatinannar's own house that stood across from this temple was called Egigpar.

Not a lot of the houses excavated can tell us about private life in Ur during the Neo-Babylonian reign. One particular house that was found had an excess of forty rooms with at least two courtyards. This might have been a public building, like a school, since it's far too big to be a private residence for the time. Other houses in its vicinity, whose remains indicate that it was an entire street, were far more modest in size. Much like the houses, not a lot of graves survived from this period, and the ones that did are in poor condition and cannot properly be examined.

*Cylinder of king Nabonidus found in the temple of the moon god at Ur, British Museum in London*[xxvi]

# The End of Ur – Persians, Drought, Abandonment

Nabonidus was the last monarch of the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty. Due to his habits of not ruling the empire directly, Babylon quickly crumbled and gave way to a foreign power, the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great. He sacked Babylon in 539 BC, and it is likely that he started some minor work in Ur the same year, as tablets with his name were found in the city. Sadly, he died roughly a decade later, so whatever work he started must have been finished by his successor, Cambyses II, who still used the bricks inscribed with Cyrus' name. Ur was already diminished in prominence by this point, but for the following three decades of Persian rule, it would see very minor prosperity.

The final nail in the coffin of Ur's demise was near the end of the sixth century BC. It was at this point when Euphrates shifted its course more eastward. This would have effectively left the city waterless and unfit for life. Naturally, the shift was happening gradually, as archeologists did uncover two Persian burials in the bed of the grand canal which went around Ur's eastern side. This indicates that the people of Ur were still fighting to stay in the city, despite the shift in the river's course. By the year 500 BC, the city was abandoned in its entirety. And considering the harsh weather conditions that ensued, nobody visited the site for centuries and the only people that would have even went past it were the Bedu nomads. However, these conditions made it the perfect ground for preservation, giving future archeologists plenty of material to study the ancient past of this magnificent city.

# Chapter 5 – Important Finds at Ur: Architecture and the City Layout, Notable Buildings, and Artistic Objects

## Architecture of Ur and the City Layout

It is difficult to speak of architecture within Ur during any period prior to the Akkadian invasion. As best as we can make out, the houses of early Ubaid Ur were most likely mud and reed houses, similar to how modern-day Marsh Arabs build their huts in this area. The best-preserved structures of these early periods are the various cemeteries and burial sites, but more on that later.

In terms of the Third Dynasty and onward, the plan of Ur was more or less similar to any major city in Sumer. During the Third Dynasty, Ur had a temenos enclosed by a wall, which housed the ziggurat, the Giparku, the Edublalmah, the Enunmah, the Eghursag, the royal graves, and the Nanna Court. Later additions by Neo-Babylonians would expand the wall, giving the temenos more area. Outside of the temenos wall were two harbors, the north and the west one, directly linked to the outer wall. There were also two "suburbs" of houses, one directly southwest of the temenos wall and the other more southeast. The latter of the two included houses built during the Neo-Babylonian times. Further south was the Enki temple, and moving north, past a remaining Kassite fort and a row of houses on the wall, we find the unnamed harbor temple and the house of Nabonidus' high priestess daughter, Belshaltinannar. At its peak, Ur was possibly the largest city in the world, as it had an estimated 65,000 inhabitants.

Most of the houses in this period were made of plano-convex mud bricks and mud plaster. For sturdier buildings, they used bitumen and reeds. The walls were made up of sloping ramparts. These would be as high as eight meters or 26 feet tall. Each house, as stated in earlier chapters, normally had a family tomb directly below the floor, and in later periods, there were even remains of house chapels. It wasn't uncommon for invading cultures to build atop of used houses. Also, because of the presence of dead bodies directly underneath the building, which must have produced a pungent odor, the inhabitants themselves would eventually move, leaving the house for a different family to inhabit.

Other buildings existed within Ur, most notably scribe schools, shops, kilns, offices for various smiths and artisans, as well as forts and watchtowers. The latter two would normally be away from the living areas, usually as a part of the outer wall.

# Notable Buildings and Artistic Objects

## The Ziggurat of Ur

It is impossible to talk about Ur without mentioning its most magnificent architectural achievement. Located northwest within the temple complex, it was encompassed by the Etemenniguru, the Nanna temple and its courtyard, the Boat shrine, and the Ningal temple. In terms of size, it was 200 by 150 feet or 61 by 46.7 meters, however, we do not know how tall it was due to the top, which contained a shrine, being leveled a long time ago. The ziggurat was made of a solid mass of brickwork. In its center it was constructed of sun-dried brick, whereas kiln-burnt brick was used for its revetment laid in rather tough bitumen. Each wall consisted of shallow buttresses and recesses. Its foundation is a wide terrace level, and roofs of the temple courtyard chambers surrounded the great temple which stood before it. You would get to the upper levels of the ziggurat by one of the three massive staircases that count a hundred steps each. One goes axially from the main façade, whereas the other two come at its side at right angles. Receding terraces gave the ziggurat its signature look, and on the very top, which is now flat, stood a shrine where you might have direct contact with the gods.

Considering how many times it has been rebuilt and restored, it’s no surprise to say that the ziggurat was the single most important building in the city. It was so massive for its time that it ultimately achieved what its purpose was in the first place–to appear as a mountain reaching for the heavens to any traveler looking from afar. There were, of course, many ziggurats built throughout the ages in Mesopotamia, but none retained the splendor and glory of the one at Ur.

*The Ziggurat of Ur, partially reconstructed*[xxvii].

## The Royal Cemetery

Many who work in archeology would agree that discovering this site was Woolley's greatest discovery, and considering everything else he did at Ur, that's quite the statement. However, the royal tombs provided archeologists with the best possible look into the lives and statuses of the people of Ur, spanning thousands of years.

The cemetery site is within today's Dhi Qar Governorate, near Ur's own site, in Iraq. Woolley excavated and identified more than 2,000 graves overall, with even more being uncovered and studied later. Interestingly, he didn't begin excavation the exact moment he came across them. Instead, he moved his entire team onto a different site and then returned to the tombs roughly four years later, after his crew gained significantly more experience in excavating.

Sixteen particular tombs caught Woolley's eye, and he declared them "royal" based on the number of offerings (and the contents thereof) which were found in them as opposed to other, non-royal graves. It's more likely that only a few of these were royal graves insofar as they contain the remains of actual kings and queens. The others, while bearing inscriptions like "ensi," "en," or "lugal" (roughly translated as "governor", "high priest/priestess" and "king") were probably graves of princes and princesses, high priests, or even minor nobles. Nevertheless, a few of these graves actually were of royal personages, one being King Meskalamdug who isn't in the Sumerian King's List. Judging by the estimated date of his burial, he was likely a son, or at the very least a contemporary, of

Mesannepada, the progenitor of the First Dynasty of Ur. Another more famous ruler found buried in the Royal Cemetery was the queen Puabi. It's important to note, however, that her royal title is still disputed by modern archeology. She might have been a high priestess or an important consort to a king. Whatever her title was, there's no denying that she was important enough to have a rich, ceremonious funeral that any king at the time would have.

She was buried with no less than 52 separate attendants, which included both men and women, among which were guards, a choir, servants, and several different types of animals. The number of items made of gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli, silver, and shells speak volumes of her affluence.

The number of attendants she was buried with, however, is not a surprising one, considering that other nobles, Meskalamdug included, were also buried with a massive amount of bodies in their close vicinity, most often right under the king or queen's grave. Examining these corpses, among which were men and women but surprisingly few children, archeologists, even during Woolley's time, came to a conclusion that some form of ritual human sacrifice followed the burial of kings. It's likely that they weren't all voluntary sacrifices, as some corpses show evident signs of struggle prior to losing their life. When other graves at other sites are taken into consideration, it's highly likely that Meskalamdug commissioned these types of funerals or were even put into place before he assumed the throne.

During excavation of these graves, a problem arose which comes up whenever archeologists excavate tombs, that of grave robbers. Most of the graves were looted nearly the same day the bodies were buried, so not a lot of evidence of valuable items remains. Queen Puabi's tomb was almost the sole exception to this, considering just how many valuable items were uncovered from it alone. However, other tombs did provide more mundane objects and inscriptions which tell us a lot about the customs and social statuses of the citizens of Ur during its First and Second Dynasty.

*One of the royal tombs at Ur*[xxviii]

## The “Standard” of Ur

There’s a reason there are quotation marks around the word “standard,” mainly because this piece of archeological splendor is not a standard at all. A standard is typically a small military banner worn by high-ranking military officials when going into battle. Considering what it’s depicting, there’s little wonder as to why the people who first found it dubbed it a standard. Based on its small size and coloration, it was most likely a part of a musical instrument. It was excavated by Woolley’s team from a grave belonging to an unknown man; it isn’t known what class the man belonged to, as only his skull was found. The Standard was likely constructed during the First Dynasty of Ur, under a king named Ur-pabilsag, who isn’t on the King’s List, but of whose reign we have some minor evidence. The Standard itself was next to the unknown man’s skull in the corner of the tomb. After being excavated and partially restored, it is now on display in the British Museum.

This so-called Standard is 47 by 27 centimeters or 18.5 by 10.6 inches in size. It’s inlaid with sea and river shells, which include mother-of-pearl, as well as lapis lazuli and red limestone. It’s important to us because of the mosaic imprinted onto it. Two sides of this Standard show what are commonly called the two Mosaic Scenes, one depicting War, and the other Peace.

The War side shows what looks like a battle and its aftermath. The king stands in the middle of its top register and is, of course, standing taller than all others. Before him and his mighty chariot, likely dragged by donkeys,

are naked prisoners of war. These prisoners are severely hurt and shackled, emphasizing victory on the side of the monarch. The middle register has eight soldiers going to war, as well as a scene of captured enemies. We know that the Standard was contemporary to the First Dynasty because helmets similar to the ones the soldiers are wearing were found in the tombs at the royal cemetery. Once again, we see enemies naked during their defeat, which was likely more of a symbolic than a literal depiction. The lower register has chariots, four in total, with charioteers and warriors in them. Both the animals and the chariots are extremely detailed and are shown in motion, depicting a battle scene which clearly involved these early vehicles. Beaten foes are under the hooves of the animals pulling the chariots, again likely being donkeys as horses weren't domesticated in this region yet. The quantity and number of beaten foes clearly shows how powerful an attack by chariots was back then.

The Peace side is somewhat more intriguing, as it shows what is most likely a banquet or a celebration of sorts. Again, we see the ruler in the top register, this time almost entirely to the left, taller and larger than anyone else. There are at least four servants surrounding him, two in front and two in the back, and before him, right behind two of the servants, are six cup-holding individuals sitting, probably raising their glasses in the monarch's honor. A lyrist and a possible singer are at the very right side of the top register. Beneath this scene, in the middle register, there are people parading animals around, as well as carrying fish. This would most likely be a preparation for the banquet with the people taking cows and rams to be slaughtered and prepared for a feast. The bottom register shows slightly different-looking men either pulling animals by their nose rings or carrying produce, again likely to be consumed during a feast.

The Standard was an important find for several reasons. First, it gave archeologists a small window into the rites and rituals of the ancient Sumerians. Next, it provided some probable information regarding the clothing and grooming styles of the period, at least in terms of everyday clothes that the masses would wear. Furthermore, we could finally learn of the technological level of this culture, especially when it came to vehicles and their varying uses. On top of that, it gave a glimpse of how the Sumerians treated their foes, not to mention how they chose to depict them in everyday art. Finally, we learned a little bit about what the Sumerians did for entertainment. This doesn't just relate to the banquet in and of itself.

The presence of a lyrist and a singer tells us that music played a major part in Sumerian social circles, even ones as high as the royal court.

*The Standard of Ur, British Museum in London*[xxix]

## The Rams in the Thicket

Another masterpiece of Sumerian art, this pair of statues was uncovered by Woolley from a major section of the Royal Cemetery at Ur called the Great Death Pit, where large numbers of armed men were buried. One of these statues is slightly taller than the other, but both are roughly a little over 45 cm or 17.7 inches tall. Their name was given by Woolley himself, a devout Christian, and it is a reference to a passage in the Bible where Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac before God prevents him from doing so. Instead of sacrificing Isaac, Abraham chooses to sacrifice a ram, whose horns were stuck in a thicket, to the Lord.

Both ram statues were crafted in roughly the same way. The core of the body of one such figure was wooden, with the body being more roughly shaped and the head and legs crafted with significantly more detail. This body was held together with wax when Woolley decided to excavate it, which he poured specifically for that purpose. That way all of the elements would remain as they are and not fall apart, with little harm done to them. Gold leaf layers covered the head and legs of the ram which the craftsman hammered against the wood and stuck them together with bitumen. The ears of the ram are made of copper and have gone green throughout the

millennia. The fleece isn't the same material everywhere; the shoulder fleece, along with the horns, is entirely lapis lazuli-made, whereas the fleece of the body is made of shells and once again stuck onto it with bitumen. Under its silver belly were golden genitals, and gold also adorned the tree, making up its leaves and flowers. This entire figure stood on a rectangular base which had a mosaic on it made of the same materials as the Standard of Ur (red limestone, lapis lazuli, and shells). Silver chains, now corroded away, used to link the figure to the flowering shrub.

Considering the similarity of both rams, it's speculated that they stood facing each other propped up a bigger object, such as a bowl or a pot. There were also hypotheses that the rams were used as decorations for musical instruments, similar to the bodies of the instruments found at Ur which had animal motifs, as you'll read below.

*One of the ram figurines, British Museum in London*[xxx]

## The Lyres of Ur

Technically speaking, the instruments covered in this text are three lyres and one harp; however, they are collectively called the Lyres of Ur for convenience, and we shall refer to them all as lyres here for that same reason. Woolley uncovered them within a tomb containing ten women, reportedly with one corpse laying a hand on an instrument, mimicking playing it. Woolley had the brilliant insight to pour plaster into the holes which he assumed bore instruments, thus preserving the perished wooden core and excavating the instruments fairly well-restored. Naturally, there

were elements of the lyres which were made of non-perishable materials such as silver and gold.

All four lyres differed to an extent. The best preserved was the so-called Golden Lyre of Ur, or the Bull's Lyre. Most of its reconstructed wooden body was damaged during the second Iraqi war because of a local flooding near the museum where it was held. The reason it's called the Golden Lyre is because of the bull-head attached to it. It's largely made of gold, with the eyes being inlaid mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli. Lapis lazuli was also used for the beard, as it was with other lyres with bull's heads. Woolley suspected that the body of the Bull's Lyre probably even had legs, but that they perished alongside the rest of the original wooden body.

Queen Puabi makes a comeback with the second lyre, called aptly the Queen's Lyre. It was found in her tomb, after all, and stands 110 centimeters or 43 inches tall. Much like the Golden Lyre, the Queen's Lyre has a bull's head made of gold, with the rest of the face being lapis lazuli and the horns a modern reconstruction by. The forehead of the Queen's Lyre is a bit curved around the brow of the bull, whereas the Great Lyre has a perfectly straight forehead.

Next is the Great Lyre which stands 33 cm tall and 11 cm or 13 and 4.3 inches wide. Once more we have a bull's head and a lyre whose body represents the body of a bull, such as it is with the Queen's Lyre. Gold makes up the head, face, and horns of the bull, whereas lapis lazuli hair, eyes, and beard adorn it. This lyre also has a front panel made of the same materials as the Standard of Ur and the bases of the Rams in the Thicket. This panel has a depiction of a hero holding onto a bull's horns and below it are animals which act as humans. In terms of iconography, the bull's head he's wrestling with represents Shamash, or Utu, the sun god.

The last of these great instruments is the Silver Lyre, also 110 cm or 43 inches tall and roughly just as wide. Another, not as well-preserved silver lyre was found next to it in the Great Death Pit, and both were made of wood originally then coated in silver sheets that were, surprisingly, not stuck there with bitumen, but rather attached with tiny nails also made of silver. The eyes of the bull were, unsurprisingly, made of lapis lazuli, which also made up the narrow borders of the whole lyre. The bull of this lyre has no beard, like the other three, but then again, it might not depict a bull at all but a cow instead.

Finding these instruments was monumental for Woolley and archeology in general, as well as musicology. It gave us a direct glimpse into the customs and the craftwork of an ancient Sumerian. Considering their location within the tombs, these lyres were more than likely used to chant burial hymns or incantations and then buried with their players. It's not unlikely to think that the graves where they were located, Queen Puabi aside, contained sacrificed court musicians.

*The Golden Lyre and the Silver Lyre, British Museum in London*[xxxi].

## Minor Finds

The section title is a bit misleading, as these finds are by no means minor in and of themselves, but rather minor when compared to the ones described above. One such find was the magnificent golden headdress of Queen Puabi. It was spectacularly crafted, with light leaves of gold, strings made of lapis lazuli and carnelian, as well as a large golden comb. Next to that, other bits of jewelry and even makeup kits were located within her tomb, showing us just how wealthy she was.

Within the graves, a vast amount of pottery was located. As stated in an earlier chapter, archeologists could largely base the period of the site based on the style of the pots themselves. In addition, these pots could tell us about the social status of the buried person, their role in the city, and what the pot was used for.

Lots of cylinder seals were excavated at Ur, which is possibly the most important find when it comes to historically dating the rulers. These small seals were used for inscriptions and were more than likely worn around the neck like a pendant. It wasn't just rulers that had them either. In fact, lots of

cylinder seals belonging to vassal rulers, priests both high and low, craftsmen, artisans, artists, scribes, merchants, and even everyday citizens resurfaced during the numerous excavations of the graves within the Royal Cemetery. This just goes to show how seriously the ancient Sumerians took writing as a new skill. It was more than just a neat way of noting trade details and temple grain. It was now a way of legitimizing oneself within society. Naturally, not all of these cylinders were deciphered; as a lot of them are inscribed either in an older variant of Sumerian which isn't that well known to us or in the very rudimentary pictographic script which doesn't provide much detail about the owner. This script would most often show rough images depicting scenes of animals and humans performing various activities.

Naturally, there were more items in these graves. Some of them include ancient board games, chisels, saws and other tools, vessels and cutlery made of various metals, earrings and discs made of electrum, various animal heads, and tiny statues of humans. Weapons and agricultural tools also took up significant room within certain tombs, as did primitive armor. Nearly all of these give us one clear picture of Ur during the first two dynasties—it was a wealthy, prosperous place with vivid burial rituals and nobility that wasn't afraid of excess.

# Chapter 6 – Social Makeup of Ur from Period to Period

Knowing what we have excavated and learned from the Royal Cemetery, the written records, the traces in archeology, and even popular literature in and around the city, we can more or less reconstruct what the ancient society was like in Ur.

During its earliest age (the Ubaid, Uruk, and Jemdat Nasr periods), Ur was more than likely a simple society made up of fishermen, hunters, craftsmen, and farmers. Religion was slowly coming into shape, so this society must have had some type of official religious figures. If we were to further speculate, these hypothetical priests would be the predecessors of the en, or high priests, which would later evolve into lugals, or kings. But that was still many millennia after the Ubaid Ur. Ubaid Ur people practiced a more primitive religion that likely included some form of human sacrifice. On a lighter side, Ubaid Ur Sumerians were very successful craftsmen. They produced pottery by hand at first, but soon enough, the slow wheel became prominent and the pottery "business" would boom. They were also primitive tradesmen, as evidence of materials not native to this region are found in their tombs. Trade was by no means expansive, but it most likely did exist in some minor form. In terms of architecture, we cannot be sure, but we can posit that their houses were simple and made of local materials, which included clay, mud, and reeds. Tools for working these materials were simple and were almost always made of either stone or clay. With the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates River being close, regularly traveling by boat was common as early as back then.

However, this simple life would soon give way to a more vibrant, more urban, and more dangerous culture of the first royal dynasties. During this time, Ur, much like other cities, started developing castes. The priestly class was at the top, and oftentimes a high priest would declare himself king, but there was still an assembly made up of two "houses," the Upper and the Lower House. The first was made up of elders, most likely priests and noblemen, whereas the second house contained common folk and maybe nobles of lesser status. Most of the citizens were either farmers or artisans of some kind, and slavery was a common practice. Rulers and high priests normally lived and worked in temples, which would soon develop into what

we know as ziggurats. City walls were being erected, largely as a means of protecting the city inhabitants, and stronger, taller houses began to pop up. Writing became a huge part of the culture everywhere in Mesopotamia, and Ur wasn't behind on this front as scribes started becoming more prominent. But scribes weren't the only people of whose exploits we have archeological evidence. Potters, smiths, gardeners, builders, shopkeepers, accountants, soldiers—all of these and many more, made up the working lifeline of Ur. Another "lifeline" of the city would be the irrigation canals. They slowly started to pop up, irrigating the area and providing more farmland, which was largely treated as private property of the farmers themselves, or rather anyone who had enough wealth to maintain ownership of one. Even temples had their own farmland, which was worked by either some of the massive temple staff or by hired help from the people around the city. As stated, slavery was also vibrant, though not nearly as harsh or hostile as it would become in the following empires that would shake Asia Minor (as well as Northern Africa and the Balkans in Europe). A person would become a slave in early Ur by either losing in a war against the city (this is where the majority of non-Sumerian, not Ur-born slaves came from), failing to pay the taxes to the temple, or being sold by their own family into it as a child. Interestingly, anyone could either work off or pay off their slavery and effectively buy their freedom, and the children of slaves were treated as free citizens.

The religion in Ur also became more defined during this period. The pantheon of Sumerian gods was already established. People worshiped various gods, such as the supreme god An, the wind god Enlil, the mother goddess Ninhursag, the sun god Utu, the goddess of fertility Innana, and so on. Each city had their own titular deity which would govern over it, so it was not uncommon for the biggest temples in cities to be dedicated to them. It was evident that Ur was the sacred site of the moon god which the Sumerians called Nanna and the Akkadians called Sin, resulting in both names being fused at some point. And speaking of Akkadians, even in these early days, Ur had a substantial Akkadian minority, one that was capable of reaching the highest positions of power, as evidenced by queen Puabi, whose name ("word of my father" in Akkadian) and high position tell us that she was most likely Semitic by birth. With the emergence of kings and queens of this time, royal tombs began to pop up more and more. This also led to some new burial customs, which included ritual sacrifice of

numerous servants and soldiers alongside the ruler, as was the case with Puabi and Meskalamdug, for example.

With Sargon's conquest, Ur's society would see its first major shift. For the first time, there was an outside ruler that outranked the local governor, and for the first time it was a non-Sumerian king who was giving orders. However, the social makeup of the city remained largely the same. Tradesmen and craftsmen continued their work as usual, and the temple didn't lose its legitimacy, as evidenced by the fact that Sargon appointed his own daughter to be the high priestess at Ur. With the fall of the Akkadians and the subsequent Gutian rule, however, things changed. The citizenry of Ur no longer had the same luxury items as it did before the Akkadians. On the other hand, much like in all other Sumerian cities at the time, the priests and the governors were slowly, but surely reclaiming the city's independence. They were still vassals to the Gutians, but it was largely nominal and effectively a non-issue for the city.

The best period in Ur's history, during its Third Dynasty, came after the Gutians fell. All five rulers held the title "king of the four quarters," which was used only by conquerors such as Sargon. A king of Ur now held sway over important centers such as Uruk and Nippur, making him the most powerful figure in the region. He could now appoint his own governors and high priests in both Ur and other cities, directly affecting their own social lives. To an extent, a person living in Ur would be treated with more reverence than someone from a different city. People became wealthier and more prosperous. Houses of the local populace grew bigger, sturdier, and more opulent. Artisans and craftsmen boasted magnificent trade, often trading with people as far as Anatolia, North Mesopotamia, and probably even the Indus Valley. Canals were springing up everywhere, and farmers as well as fishermen now had an abundance of water, water that was also available to important city landmarks such as the ziggurat itself. The farmers used the water for their fields, where they would grow date trees, wheat, lentils, onions, chickpeas, garlic, lettuce, leek, or mustard. They would have already domesticated sheep, oxen, donkeys, and pigs, either herding them for meat and other products such as wool, or using them for transportation or as beasts of burden. Hunters were also prominent in Ur, hunting gazelles and fowl. Some farmers were employed to work the fields of the temple, but most were independent and owned their own property, offering produce as tribute to the gods during ceremonies.

The arts and literature flourished in Third Dynasty Ur, with veritable libraries popping up within the temples and more and more children learning how to write cuneiform in scribe schools known as the Eduba, predominantly boys, though there were scarce examples of female scribes. Poems of various genres would be written, mostly dealing with the religion of Sumerians and the many myths surrounding their gods, heroes, and even animals and inanimate objects. Most of the scribes came from wealthy families, and there are even recorded examples of children misbehaving and acting spoiled within the Eduba. Children who misbehaved in school would be "caned," or beaten with a stick, whereas parents would merely berate them for taking their privilege of learning for granted. There was also some early written evidence of military conscription of everyday citizens, meaning that the city might have even had a standing army to its name.

It's interesting to note that a number of written records provide inscriptions where local governors swore loyalty to the noblemen of Ur, and this wasn't limited to swearing loyalty to just kings. In fact, a person could swear loyalty to an Ur governor, a high priestess, a princess, a queen, a high priest, or even a person of significant influence who wasn't employed by the temple. These pledges of loyalty by outsiders are undeniable evidence of Ur's power in the region. More evidence to this is how the trade went in the city. The merchants maintained trade with any area that wasn't willing to go to war with Ur, and furthermore, merchants from other areas even made Ur their permanent home, meaning that the city was, in a sense, multinational and diverse. And with a city that at its peak had 65,000 inhabitants at the very least, making it the largest city at the time, this would hardly be a surprise.

However, Third Dynasty Ur had its own problems. Its citizens would probably be painfully used to constant raids by nomadic tribes, the most frequent perpetrators being the Amorites and the Elamites. The walls offered minor protection, but farmers working outside of the temple walls would still suffer raids, so much so that later rulers of the Third Dynasty would have to fashion an outside wall, which gave the city its relative borders and archeologists, several millennia later, an idea of just how big Ur was in and of itself.

But outside threats weren't the only problem. Rebellions weren't that frequent in Ur, but political intrigue was, another somewhat modern invention at the time which grew and expanded with the Third Dynasty and

was perfectly evident in how Ishbi-erra acted during the reign of Ibbi-sin. In its waning years, Third Dynasty Ur would see cities abandon its rule, leaving it and its citizens to their destiny.

The first sack of Ur was a devastating event, so much so that the contemporary high priests wrote a long lamentation poem called the Lament for Ur, wherein the gods themselves decree that Ur must fall and that they are abandoning it. The people were probably left to their devices, as the Elamites were still a largely nomadic culture with no interest of taking control of cities, but all immediate production in Ur ceased. There was no ruler, and it's possible that some prominent families in the city took control of all trade, or what remained of it. The situation changed when first Isin and then Larsa took control of the city, being the first of many foreign kingdoms to claim dominion over Ur. People were still living under the same social structure of priests, farmers, craftsmen, scribes, and slaves, but the city itself had to pay an annual tax to the outside rulers. Trade started flourishing again, and the people would stay stable and unhindered even during the reign of the first Babylonian ruler, Hammurabi.

Hammurabi's successor Samsu-iluna sacked Ur again during a rebellion. Until the coming of the Kassites, the citizens of Ur would not see any progress. The trade would stagnate, as would all other aspects of life such as art, agriculture, and religion in particular. Old temples, walls, and other buildings would be deteriorating or repurposed for a different use. Two more important periods would see minor surges in Ur's history, one under Assyrians, or more precisely the local governors who were loyal to the Assyrian crown, and the other under the Neo-Babylonian King Nabonidus.

During this last period of Ur's growth, the priests of Ur gained prominence again. With major reconstructions around the temples and the city walls, as well as entire neighborhoods of new houses rising, such as the one in the southeast of Ur mentioned in the previous chapter, the city life flourished. Priests were performing their duties regularly, and farmers and fishermen did their job outside the temenos walls. Naturally, trade resumed and the local economy rose again. All of this was helped by the fact that Nabonidus came from a town that worshiped the same deity as the people of Ur did, that being Nanna-Sin.

Not much is known about the social makeup of Ur after Nabonidus and during the Persian rule over the city. Trade was slowly shifting to the north, so it's highly probable that Ur saw fewer and fewer people willing to trade

for a living. There were still some vestiges of farming in the city, but considering the climate change in the area discussed in a previous chapter, the change which came after the Euphrates shifted its course. No trade meant no raw materials for artisans and craftsmen, so production of their goods slowed down immensely. By the year 500, there really wasn't any society to speak of in Ur. An interesting question remains regarding what happened to all of the people living in Ur. Whether they died off unceremoniously in the growing desert or just moved to different, still-vibrant cities is a matter of debate with little evidence to support either side.

# Chapter 7 – Notable Historical Events in Ur

Considering its influence, it is no surprise that Ur was the setting of several notable events that shaped the history of Sumer as a whole. Most of these events occurred during the Ur III period and most of them were already described in earlier chapters. However, this chapter will deal with them in a bit more depth, delving into why these particular events were worthy of earning a historical footnote.

## Ur-nammu's Ascension to Kingship

As noted, Ur-nammu was already a governor of Ur during Utu-hengal's dominion over the area. However, in 2112 BC, he would singlehandedly dethrone Uruk and place Ur as the ultimate power over the region.

This event was, of course, notable because of what Ur-nammu would represent to the people of Ur. While not a local, he decided not to rule over the region from his native Uruk, which he would conquer and annex soon after his coronation, but instead remained in Ur and declared it a center of his kingdom. Because of this alone, he is arguably the most important Ur III ruler, though some would argue, even rightfully to an extent, that this title should belong to his son, Shulgi.

This event would also be the one which skyrocketed the Ur III Period, so it's relevant as an important stepping stone towards the glorious rise of the city on the political stage.

## Ur-nammu's Run to Nippur

Earlier in this book, this was referred to as the "trip to Nippur," but according to Sumerian writings (and likely not factually accurate), this trip was, in fact, a run. If this story is to be believed, Ur-nammu, just like Shulgi would do after him, literally ran from Ur to Nippur and back. This was to show their skill and prowess as both a ruler and a man, and naturally, the destination had to be none other than the most sacred city in Sumer.

This run, fictional as it may have been, is an important event for purely political reasons. It was after this momentous run that Nippur acknowledged the primacy of Ur-nammu, as well as Ur in general. Ur-nammu effectively secured himself the coveted title held by Sargon of Akkad many centuries earlier, the title of "king of the four quarters". Naturally, Nippur would accept this as legitimate, and Ur-nammu would later do major construction and reconstruction projects at this sacred city to further cement his position..

The people of both Ur and Nippur must have welcomed Ur-nammu as their new overlord. Years of Gutian dominion left their mark, and any domestic ruler with the desire to maintain Sumerian cultural heritage was welcome. There would be one more reason why Ur-nammu would be welcomed as the overlord of Sumer, though. Specifically to the citizens of Ur, it would bolster their own social ranks among other cities. Ur was no longer just a

harbor city at the south with some decent trade. It was now an imperial city, which brings with it a certain air of elitism. Being more important than Nippur, and especially more than their former master, Uruk, was just that significant to citizens of Ur.

## Construction of the Ziggurat

This event spans two great rulers, Ur-nammu and Shulgi. It doesn't take much to consider this a historic moment in early human history in general, but as an event to its contemporaries, it bears importance for several reasons.

First, it cemented the dominion of Ur over other cities. True, other cities had palaces and temples similar to a ziggurat, but none were as expensive, expansive, or massive as this one. This was a miracle of ancient engineering, and it had to be located in the city which ruled over all others. Size mattered even back in Ancient Mesopotamia, especially if you wanted to make a point of your rule.

The second reason why this event is important is because of what it initiated. Other ziggurats began to be built after this one. Soon enough, other cultures adopted and adapted this concept, and ziggurats became more grandiose, more striking, and more monumental. The ziggurat was, no pun intended, the first step towards megalithic architecture in Asia Minor.

The third reason, possibly one not intended by the original rulers, was the fact that the ziggurat remains one of the most striking monuments of the ancient world, owing this to the simple fact that it's so huge and sturdy. For centuries, people would pass this lone desert mound and think of it as a massive rock or hill, yet one somehow built by human hands. In effect, the ziggurat reached immortality, extending the story of imperial Ur well beyond its demise and well beyond its borders.

There are more reasons why building the ziggurat was important, but they're largely a variation of the three noted above. Any way you take it, the mighty Ziggurat of Ur rightfully earns its place in history.

## Ur-nammu's Code of Law

While older law codes existed, this was the first extant legal text in the world. It would set the standard for all other law codes to follow in the region and it predated the Code of Hammurabi by at least three centuries.

Naturally, this event is important for world history. However, the event would be no less important at the time when Ur-nammu actually codified it. Much like Urukagina centuries before him, Ur-nammu did this to earn favor with both the gods and the men of Ur. Ur-nammu drawing up a law code was a continuation of a long-standing tradition of reputable rulers that stressed how they "brought law to the land," how they effectively ended chaos and established peace, an example of which would be king Urukagina's code in the city of Lagash. This would make them equal to gods, in a sense, as they would use their power for benevolence, or to put it differently, they would bring about habitable order for everyone using their "divine" ability to discern what is just and what is not. Previous events, like the run to Nippur and the building of the Ziggurat, were there to elevate Ur-nammu into a semi-divine status, but this one would have kept him there, providing far more legitimacy.

*Ur-nammu Law-Code, Istanbul Archeology Museums*[xxxii]

## Shulgi's Run to Nippur

While Shulgi's ascension to the throne and his punitive wars against the nomads who killed his father proved his aptitude to rule, it was this event that cemented Shulgi as the king of Ur. Just like his father, he boasted that he could run to Nippur and back in a day which is what he did (again, much like with Ur-nammu, this might not have been factual). The difference is that Shulgi's run would result in all subsequent rulers automatically gaining dominion over Nippur, as well as the title "king of the four quarters."

This event is also notable for establishing Shulgi as more capable and more powerful than his father. He aimed to surpass Ur-nammu, and this was definitely the best way to start.

## Shulgi Finishes the Ziggurat of Ur

Admittedly, this is merely part of a bigger event, the very building of the ziggurat, but it was important nonetheless. The major reason it was important concerns Shulgi's legitimacy and position when compared to Ur-nammu. Having his own name inscribed on the walls of the ziggurat would have cemented him as the legitimate successor to his father. He would become part of history instantly, and it would provide him with even more legitimacy when he eventually proclaimed himself a god.

## Amar-sin's Conquest

This isn't really a single event. During Amar-sin's rule, Ur would wage war with numerous cities in the north, either against the nomadic Semitic, as well as non-Semitic tribes, or against established cities that refused to bow to Ur. Numerous tribes were crushed by Amar-sin's army, and he expanded his territory to include the northern areas, effectively controlling almost all trade done via the major rivers.

Amar-sin's wars are important because this was Ur at its territorial peak. He singlehandedly controlled vast swathes of Sumer and had thus literally justified the "king of the four quarters" title. These wars would cement Ur's position as a military superpower, letting other cities know that their best bet was either to give in to them completely or to avoid waging wars, lest they be crushed.

## Digging of the Amar-sin Canal

The reason why this was an important event is rather evident. With this canal, Amar-sin connected important river waterways and promoted land irrigation throughout his empire. Waterways would be used to transport goods, statues of gods, and even serve as "roads" for both fishermen and regular folk. This canal, in effect, did the same for Ur and its empire what Shulgi's roads did for the city itself—it vastly improved infrastructure for everyone.

## Shu-sin Builds the Outer Wall

Shu-sin's efforts to build a wall to prevent the Amorites have historical significance. This was the event where the area of Ur finally received "physical" borders. But more importantly, this was the event that cemented how powerful a threat the Amorite tribes were that kept advancing on the mighty city. Shu-sin already had military campaigns against other tribes to the north, such as the campaign against Simanum, where he married off one of his daughters, but none of those made him pull such a monumental defensive move such as building a wall like the Amorite advances.

## The First Sack of Ur

The worst thing to happen to a ruler is for an event marking the end of his reign to be more remembered than he himself. Ibbi-sin underwent this, being the ruler who was largely responsible for the total loss of the city's glory. This event would mark the complete death of Sumer and would pave way for Semitic dominance of the region, in one form or another, for many millennia to come. It was also an important event because it gave rise to two new, albeit minor, powers in the region, one at lesser-known Isin and one at moderately-known Larsa. Power finally shifted from Ur to two different cities, though in reality, most other cities were effectively independent.

However, the most critical event within this period that would overshadow the ones in the paragraph above was the destruction of the city under the Elamites. This event produced an entirely new genre of Sumerian art known as lamentation poetry, where it was written that the gods themselves decided to abandon the city. So powerful was the destruction of Ur and so humiliating the defeat of Ibbi-sin by the Elamites (which also included the rise of his former upstart governor Ishbi-erra and his eventual kingship) that it would echo for many, many years in the future. It was the perfect

antithesis to the might that Ur had maintained for literally centuries, which made the utter ruination of the city all the more painful.

## The Second Sack of Ur

Samsu-Iluna is responsible for the second most painful event in Ur's pre-abandonment history. However, Ur wasn't the only city to suffer this fate. Rim-Sin II, an upstart, led a rebellion against the Babylonian emperor from Larsa. Pushed back by Samsu-Iluna's army, Rim-Sin moved more southward, which in effect made Samsu-Iluna lay waste to all cities there, even ones he personally somewhat rebuilt, such as Ur. He leveled most of the residential areas, set fires to them, tore the canal, and looted as much as possible, leaving Ur in ruins. This was important because it left Ur in the clutches of historical irrelevance until the Kassites took control, which was quite the blow considering it was slowly getting back on its feet during the Old Babylonian rule.

## The Minor Nabonidus Renaissance

Many rulers did various work in the city, but none underwent as many massive rebuilding projects as Nabonidus. The significance of his activity at Ur is huge. It was more than just a ruler fortifying a territory. Ur was coming back to prominence because of Nabonidus' religious beliefs. It was the first time in centuries that a ruler would treat Ur on an equal footing with a different major city. As such, it was a time when the citizens could again enjoy proper trade and economic prosperity. It was quite literally the last time there was any activity of this sort in the city, as the following years would mark one decline after the other.

## Rediscovery

Moving into the early 19th century, we see the first efforts of Colonel Cheney and J. Baillie Fraser to visit Ur and plan out possible excavations in the future. In other words, 1835 would be the first year where a major interest in Ur got rekindled. Sure, Pietro della Valle visited it in 1625 very shortly, doing nothing more than taking a few souvenirs with him to Italy, but it was the 19th century that sparked an archeological curiosity for the ancient city. And soon enough, people would swarm back to it, of many nations and backgrounds. It was alive and important again, but in an entirely different way. However, it was during the excavations of Sir Leonard Woolley from 1922 onwards that Ur really "came back to life,"

initiating a massive wave of scholarly interest, which would inevitably lead to publications continuously asking questions about Ur, such as the book you have in your hands right now.

# Chapter 8 – Abraham of Ur: The Importance of the Biblical Figure

Let’s depart from the city for a bit and discuss possibly the most famous non-royal figure to come from it, a figure that would be influential in no less than three major worldwide religions—Abraham.

There is a good reason that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are collectively called the Abrahamic religions. The figure of Abraham plays a prominent role in them, as well as two more religions that spawned from it, Bábism and the Bahá'í Faith.[1]As the father of monotheism and one of the early Messengers of God, Abraham would almost singlehandedly usher in a new era of belief in the Old World, whose traditions remain to this day across the globe.

According to tradition, Abraham, or Abram, was born as the son of Terah, himself a descendant of Noah; in the city the Bible would call “Ur of the Chaldees.” Scholars largely disagree that the area was actually Ur. Some have suggested Urum, a different Sumerian city; whereas others focus more on the region itself which merely bore the name of Ur due to its prominence. Terah had a small shop where he made idols, which young Abraham must have been just as efficient at but had ultimately declined to make because of his changed beliefs. Tradition also tells us of a certain Nimrod, who was king at the time and who had a dream wherein Abraham would overshadow him as the new rising star. This ultimately resulted in Abraham being exiled to Harran, from which he would be additionally exiled to Canaan, the land which now comprises modern Israel.

However, no ruler called Nimrod is known to exist in Sumer at the time Abraham was presumably born, near the end of the third millennium BC. It was, in fact, the time when the Third Dynasty of Ur was still active and booming. Parallels were drawn between the biblical Nimrod and nearly every ruler of the Ur III Dynasty, most believing it to be Ur-nammu (who commissioned the building of the great ziggurat, popularly believed to have inspired the biblical story of the Tower of Babel) or Amar-sin. It’s tempting to think that Abraham, had he really existed at the time, was indeed of Ur origin, this thought being further emphasized by him having extended family in Harran, another place where the moon god Nanna was worshiped.

These “sister cities” in this religious regard would likely have had families that moved to and fro between them, especially at the height of Ur’s power.

Yet, historical evidence doesn’t mention anyone in Ur that preached monotheistic views at the time, or at least there isn’t any evidence discovered so far. In addition, Nimrod was recorded to worship fire, yet every ruler of Ur, some even thousands of years after the Sumerians were long gone, worshiped the god of the moon. Moreover, Nimrod’s lineage is given in the Hebrew Bible, which doesn’t correspond to any of the Sumerian kings of Ur based on the evidence.

However, biblical stories, at least when it comes to real-life events, ought to be taken as allegories or semi-mythical in nature. Abraham, much like the older kings of Sumer, was given an abnormally long lifespan, at least according to the lunar calendar. But even with the regular solar calendar, he would have had to be an exceptional human being to father no less than eight children by three separate wives in his later years.

Nevertheless, discrepancies aside, Abraham’s figure was one of vast influence in the Abrahamic religions. He is represented as one of the founders of Judaism, the first real Hebrew, and the father of their people. In Christianity, though not as prominent, Abraham still holds an important place as a man of pure faith and not blind devotion. Muslims also treat Abraham, or Ibrahim, as their spiritual father, a concept somewhat continued by Bábism. The Bahá'í, on the other hand, see Abraham as one of the many Messengers of God, much like the Báb, Muhammad, Jesus, and Moses were after him. He is seen as one of the people who have the divine right to preach the word of God while not being a representation of God himself. All five of these religions claim that their holy men have direct descendants from Abraham, either by his first son Ishmael, his second son Isaac, or his other six sons. In a sense, Abraham is that link which makes all of these religions intertwined and related to one another.

But Abraham was important to early archeologists as well. Woolley, a devout Christian, was absolutely sure that he had found the city of Ur as described in the Bible. In 2011, archeologists unearthed a structure which they dubbed “Abraham’s house” in honor of him, but which was likely just an administrative building of sorts. Abraham’s importance to archeology is actually directly linked to the discovery of Ur. The city would probably have remained unearthed and unexcavated had Woolley, along with other largely Christian or Muslim excavators, had not been as religious and, by

extent, as respectful of biblical Abraham as they were. It's thanks to their faith that modern-day archeologists can look at this Ur, which might not be "of the Chaldees," but certainly is of Sumerian antiquity.

# Conclusion

Life began in Ur almost 6,000 years ago. It shifted from a modest culture to one of kings and priests, and during its time, it went from a capital of a massive, highly-developed empire to a shell of its former self. Before the last natives left, Ur had endless ups and downs, ebbs and flows, and then, at one point, it just stopped.

But curiosity of the human mind prevailed and Ur resurfaced in the most magnificent way. Both religious and scientific-minded people were craving to penetrate its many secrets. The latter wanted to know everything they could about early man—how he behaved, what he built, how he lived, how he died, how he treated his fellow man, how he treated his God or gods, how he formed a family, earned a living, and even how he had fun. The former group didn't care too much for the "black heads" of Sumer, but rather for one individual who influenced their own faith, one who happened to come from this city "of the Chaldees." And soon enough, even regular everyday people wanted a piece of this fascinating city.

And fascinating it was. Not many cities in the world can boast the first inn, the first "long runner," the earliest proper code of law, the best trade, the best crafts, and the tallest, most massive religious building their immediate neighbors knew and many tried to imitate. Nor can many cities boast that they singlehandedly started a veritable renaissance of the ancient world, nor can they lament their loss in a way as Ur did. Not many cities could claim their biblical significance which runs parallel to its archeological, scientific one. Ur is but one of scant few which can.

Even today, Ur inspires people of various interests. Linguists approach it to see how written language evolved throughout the ages, considering how prominent early cuneiform was within it. Lawmakers study its laws, and politicians look to its legal history to see what worked and what didn't. Architects study the mighty Ziggurat and other associated temples to see what were the simple solutions the ancient Sumerians applied to complicated problems. Tool experts look at the saws, daggers, and associated artifacts to note the changes, to spot where the tools moved from "useful" to "good." Artists observe the pottery, the statues, the steles, the instruments, and other works of art to see where all other art comes from, how it developed with time, and where it was going. Writers delve into the

many tales and poems the city has to offer, inspecting them and looking for that “original” work of literature that jump-started all other literature. And, of course, tourists look to learn a little history, to have an enjoyable visit, and, ultimately, to have a fascinating story to tell their progeny. Because, ultimately, that’s what makes Ur just as prominent now as it was today—the fact that its story is immortal and that it will go on living for at least 6,000 years more.

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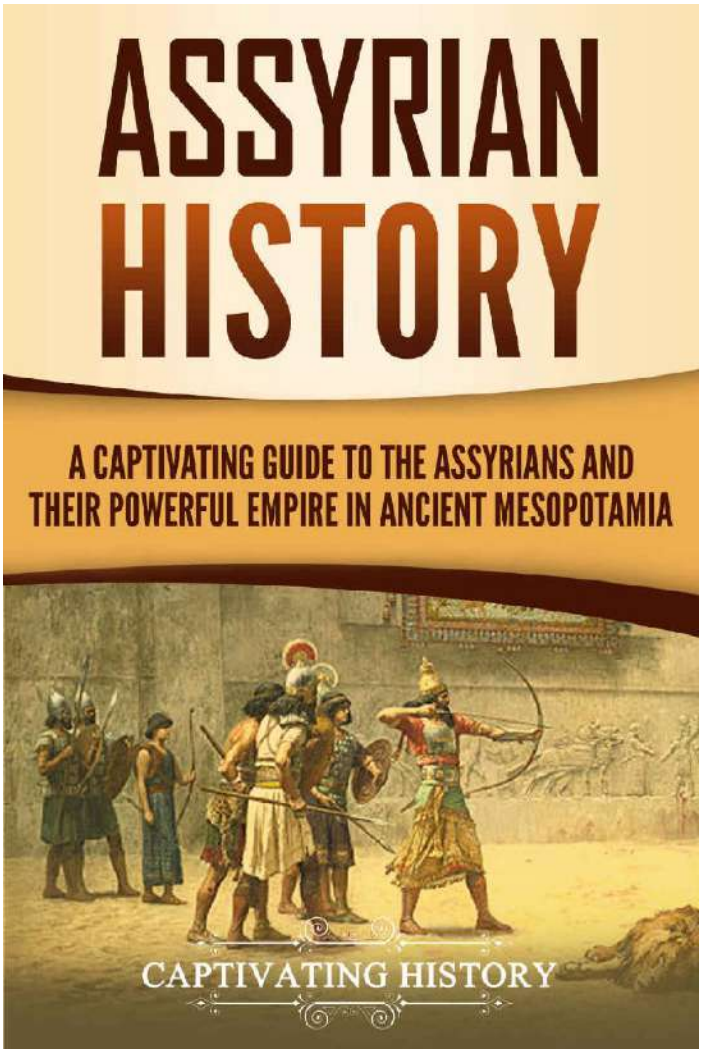
# Part 4: Assyrian History
# A Captivating Guide to the Assyrians and Their Powerful Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia



# Introduction

Located in modern-day Iraq, ancient Mesopotamia, the land between the great Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is where it all began. It's the part of the world where some 6,000 years ago people finally said goodbye to their lives as hunters and gatherers, started farming, and began building civilizations. It's from these civilizations that we get some of the most famous contributions to world history and culture, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to Hammurabi's famous code of law, which gave rise to the popular saying "an eye for an eye."

The story of Mesopotamia is one that is full of constantly changing borders, rising and falling civilizations, and, of course, war and conquest. The world's first empires would emerge here and spend thousands of years exchanging territories, swapping alliances, and fighting for supremacy. It was a real-life game of Risk being played out by some of the world's most revered, yet feared, leaders.

But of all the famous civilizations to emerge from Mesopotamia, a list that includes the Akkadians, the Sumerians, and the Babylonians, it's the Assyrians who deserve the fame and glory. The empire they constructed over the course of some 1,200 years survived constant attacks, a few defeats, and the famed Dark Age known as the Bronze Age collapse to become one of the largest and most expansive empires the world has ever seen.

After first settling along the banks of the Euphrates River in Assur, in c. 2500 BCE, the Assyrian Empire, by the end of the middle of the 7$^{th}$ century, would control more territory than any other Mesopotamian empire could ever claim. Assyrian chariots were rolling along the Nile River in Egypt, while the kings of Arabia, Palestine, Syria, Anatolia, and Phoenicia were nearly all vassals to the powerful Assyrian god-kings.

Their ruthless form of siege warfare and their brutal punishment of anyone who dared to get in their way earned them a reputation throughout Mesopotamia as a force not to be underestimated. But during this time of military dominance, the Assyrians also contributed to the advancement of human civilization. They made copies of some of the world's most famous ancient texts while creating many new works of their own. Scientists and mathematicians flocked to the libraries of Nineveh to study and share

knowledge of the ancient world, and artists helped portray to future generations the glory of Assyrian kings and gods.

But Assyrian rule of Mesopotamia would not last forever. Perhaps doomed by their own ambitions, Assyria eventually grew too big to manage. Its angry, powerful neighbors teamed up and took advantage of Assyria when its back was turned, and by the end of the 7th century, the three main Assyrian cities, Calah, Assur, and Nineveh, had been sacked, and a new power, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, was to rule Mesopotamia for the coming centuries.

However, even though the period of Assyrian domination would end seemingly soon after it began, the story of how these Semitic people started from nothing and grew to be one of the most powerful empires in the world is exciting, terrifying, and unique. And with new evidence being discovered all the time, it's a story with many secrets left to be revealed.

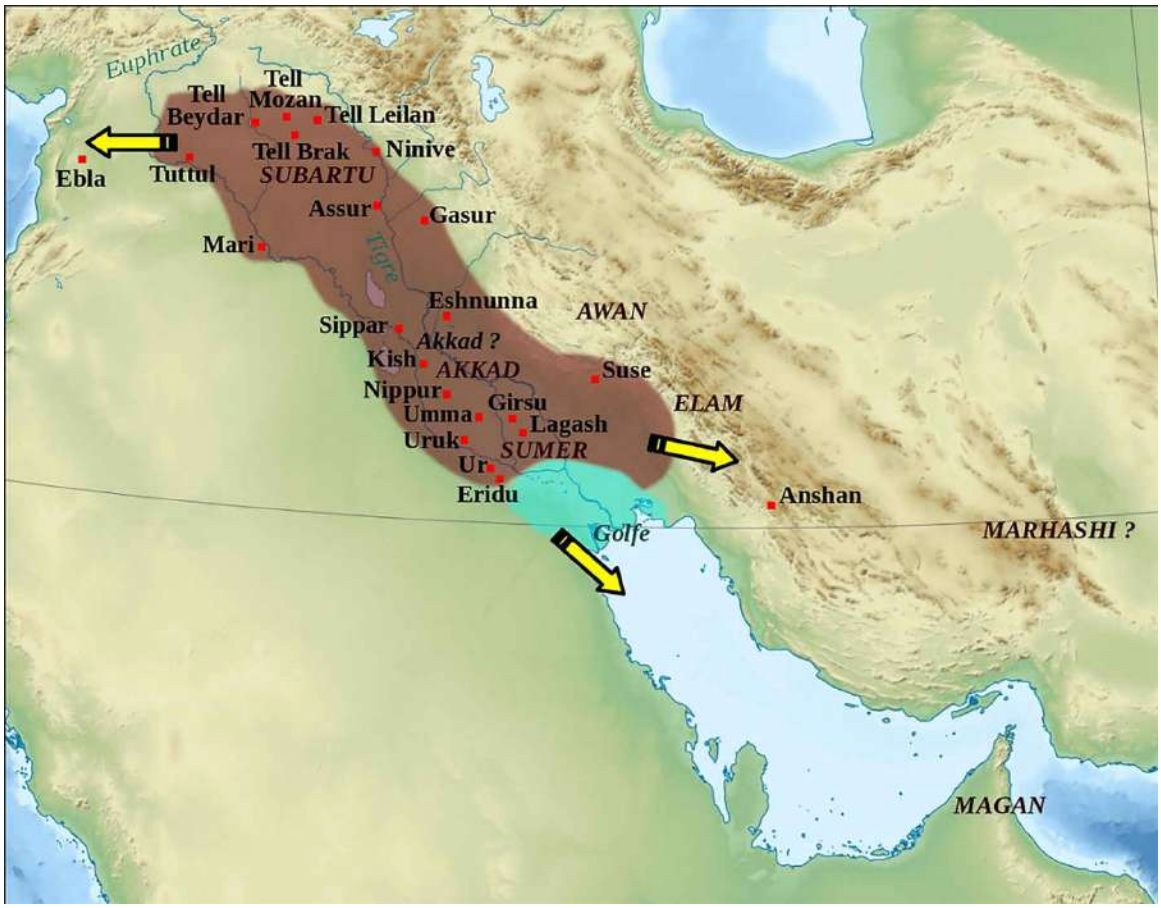
# Chapter 1 – The Assyrians Arrive in Mesopotamia: The Early Assyrian Period

Most historians divide the long history of the Assyrians into four periods: 1) the Early Assyrian Period (c. 2600-c.2025 BCE), 2) the Old Assyrian Empire (c. 2025-1378 BCE), 3) the Middle Assyrian Empire (1392-934 BCE), and 4) the Neo-Assyrian Empire (c. 911-609 BCE).

As should be expected, not much is known about the Early Assyrian Period. Little archaeological evidence exists that can paint an accurate picture of what life might have looked like, but a general idea can be pieced together based on the writings and evidence left behind by nearby civilizations, specifically the Akkadians.

The term Assyrian is derived from the name of the Assyrian capital, Assur, most likely named after the god Ashur, who Assyrians believed to be the king of all Mesopotamian gods. Historians believe people were living at the site of Assur as early as 2400 BCE, but it was mainly used as an outpost by Sumerian and Akkadian kings. Assur would develop into an independent city-state by the end of the 3rd millennia BCE (c. 2100 BCE).

During the time between the founding of Assur and the rise of the Old Assyrian Empire, Assur was largely a vassal state of the much larger Akkadian Empire, which dominated Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium by controlling most of the territory surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Figure 1 depicts the extent of Akkadian-controlled territory during the peak of its influence.




Some claim that the Akkadian Empire was the world's first, although it is difficult to verify this statement as understandings of what defines an empire differ, and earlier Sumerian civilizations may possibly be able to lay claim to this title. Nonetheless, the Akkadian Period is significant in that it was the first time any political body was able to unite both Sumerian and Akkadian-speaking populations under one rule.

The Assyrian language is a Semitic language, which describes the Afroasiatic language group that emerged out of the Middle East. The most commonly spoken Semitic languages still around today are Arabic, Amharic (spoken mostly in Ethiopia), Tigrinya (spoken mostly in Eritrea and Ethiopia), and Hebrew. After the Akkadian Empire, the Akkadian language—the first Semitic language to gain prominence in the region—replaced Sumerian as the language of Mesopotamia. In the millennia after the fall of the Akkadians, Semitic languages would come to dominate Mesopotamia, something that would prove rather useful to Assyria when it began to flex its imperial muscle.

During Akkadian and Sumerian times, Assyria was referred to on maps as Subartu, and although the exact location of Subartu is not known, it's believed to be in the northern regions of Mesopotamia near the source of the Tigris River. The Akkadians traditionally used this region as a source for slaves, and it was generally considered to be the furthest outpost of the Akkadian Empire.

The Assyrian King List documents the different Assyrian kings starting with the initial appearance of the Assyrians around Assur. The list was written on a terracotta stone in cuneiform script—the writing created in Mesopotamia that is credited as one of the origins of modern writing—and is typically divided into three groups.

The first group, "The Kings Who Lived in Tents," refers to the leaders of the semi-nomadic tribes who first settled in the area surrounding Assur. The most notable king from this group is Ushpia, for he is said to have been the king to build the Temple of Ashur, the moment often regarded as the founding of the city of Assur and the birth of Assyrian civilization.

Following this group are "The Kings Whose Fathers are Known," which lists 11 kings who ruled from c. 2030 BCE to c. 2000 BCE. One interesting aspect of this part of the list is that it was written in reverse order, and it is sometimes interpreted as a list of Shamshi-Adad's ancestors. This has led some scholars to conclude that the list was in fact created as an attempt to legitimize Shamshi-Adad's claim to the Assyrian throne, but this is not a widely accepted interpretation. The third group on the list is of kings whose names are known but whose ancestral lineage cannot be determined.

Most of the kings on this list, though, were not independent sovereigns, but rather vassals to other leaders, mostly those of the Akkadian Empire. At times this was undesirable, specifically when Akkadian leaders needed slaves and made their way into the Assyrian territory to get them. But at other times, it was extremely beneficial. For example, one of the sources of Assyrian power were their trading posts, also known as *karem*. They established several of them in Anatolia (the eastern part of modern Turkey), and frequently called upon the support of their Akkadian rulers to help them deal with raiders or other hostile forces near their trading posts. However, periods of Akkadian weakness were usually marked by Assyrian rebellions, since Assyrian kings sought to exert more power over the territory they called home. But, whenever this happened, it usually garnered a harsh

response from the Akkadian rulers. People would be killed or taken into slavery as punishment for insurrection.

The Early Assyrian Period is but a shadow of what Assyrian civilization would become over the next few millennia, but it's significant in that it laid the groundwork for what would become one of the most powerful and formidable civilizations of the ancient world. Early Assyrians organized themselves into a monarchy with Assur as the capital, and their trade with Anatolia to the west helped them to grow in both size and influence. While militarily they were still weak as compared to their neighbors, this would soon change, and Assyrian influence would grow in the region, giving birth to what is known as the Old Assyrian Empire.

# Chapter 2 – The Birth of a Civilization: The Old Assyrian Empire to the Middle Assyrian Empire

The next period of Assyrian history gives birth to the original Assyrian Empire. While it would be much smaller than any of the empires that would come later, it would prove to be a crucial part of the development of Assyrian history. During this time, the initial borders of Assyria were established, and the country began to cultivate its military tradition, making weapons, developing siege technology such as catapults, planning campaigns, and engaging in other activities that would eventually result in the military becoming Assyria's greatest asset. The Old Assyrian Empire gave way to the Middle Assyrian Empire after the Mitanni Kingdom took control of much of Mesopotamia. However, this defeat was to be but a blip on the radar in Assyria's ascension to the most powerful empire in ancient Mesopotamia.

### *The Old Assyrian Empire*

It's important to always consider the history of Assyria in its context. The Assyrian Empire grew out of the powerful kingdoms that rose to prominence after the decline of Sumerian and Babylonian power in the region. As the birthplace of human civilization, ancient Mesopotamia is defined by constant warfare, ever-shifting spheres of influence, and constantly changing alliances between different rulers and populations. It is also defined by its demographics, specifically the role of the many different ethnic groups that would migrate to Mesopotamia, settle, and extend their influence over surrounding territories and kingdoms.

The Assyrian Empire refers to the territory that was under the control of the king who resided in the city of Assur (sometimes pronounced Ashur) and who managed to secure a legitimate claim to the throne. Although there are references to a city of Assur as far back as the 3rd millennium BCE, most historians consider the building of the Temple of Ashur in c. 1900 BCE to be the founding date of the city of Assur and the Assyrian civilization.

Much like many of the other city-states in Mesopotamia, Assur became independent upon the fall of Ur and the Sumerian Empire around the year 2000 BCE. And because of its location in northwestern Mesopotamia, it was able to resist the influence of other more powerful kings that emerged

in southern Mesopotamia. However, even more significant to the rise of Assur were the trade relations it managed to build with Anatolia, the region located in the eastern portion of modern-day Turkey.

By establishing trading posts, known as *karem*, throughout Anatolia, largely near the city of Kanesh, the merchants of Assur were able to amass considerable wealth for their kingdom. These trade relations also had another significant consequence in that they helped Assur develop a strong tradition of iron working, something that would help them develop a military vastly superior to that of any of the other Mesopotamian kingdoms. And because of their experience with iron, they were far more poised to resist the Bronze Age collapse, the period of time right before the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE that caused many of Mesopotamia's populations to decline and even disappear.

Despite how advantageous this arrangement was for the kingdom of Assur and how influential it was in helping the Assyrians rise to political and military dominance in Mesopotamia, quite some time would pass between the fall of Ur and the emergence of the Assyrians as the region's hegemon.

Mass migration of Indo-European populations such as the Hittites, Amorites, Hurrians, Hattians, and many others would dramatically alter the political landscape of the Fertile Crescent staring around 2000 BCE. Before Assyria would rise to power, it would have to establish its dominance against these groups. But this would prove difficult at first, as Babylon, a city in southwestern Mesopotamia was rapidly expanding in both cultural and territorial influence, culminating in what is known as the "Old Babylonian Empire," which was ruled by the now famous Hammurabi and his infamous legal code.

With the rise of Babylon, Assyria became a secondary power in the region, but it still managed to maintain some level of independence, aided by the military conquests of the first king of the Old Assyrian Empire, Shamshi-Adad I (1813-1791 BCE). His main goal was to try and take control of the city of Mari, a kingdom that was a major stop on the trade route between Mesopotamia and Anatolia. His successful conquests helped Assyria establish firmer borders than they had previously been able to do. Shamshi-Adad I was also successful in driving out the Hittites, a growing power in Anatolia, from Assyrian lands.

Babylon fell at the time of Hammurabi's death in 1750 BCE, and Mesopotamia was thrust into a period of instability. Assyrian kings attempted to assert control over the region surrounding Assur, hoping to restore order to a territory left scrambling after the fall of Hammurabi's powerful Babylon. But they were unsuccessful.

It wasn't until nearly 25 years later, in c. 1726 BCE, when the Assyrian king Adasi came to power and was once again able to secure control over Assyrian borders. He was even able to bring some former Babylonian territories under his control, but this would be short-lived, as the Kassites, a relatively unknown group originating from the Zagros Mountains and who were not speakers of a Semitic language, took control of Babylon and were able to hold it for most of the next four centuries. However, after securing Assur and the territories immediately surrounding it, King Adasi made few attempts at expanding Assyrian influence in the region for the next several centuries.

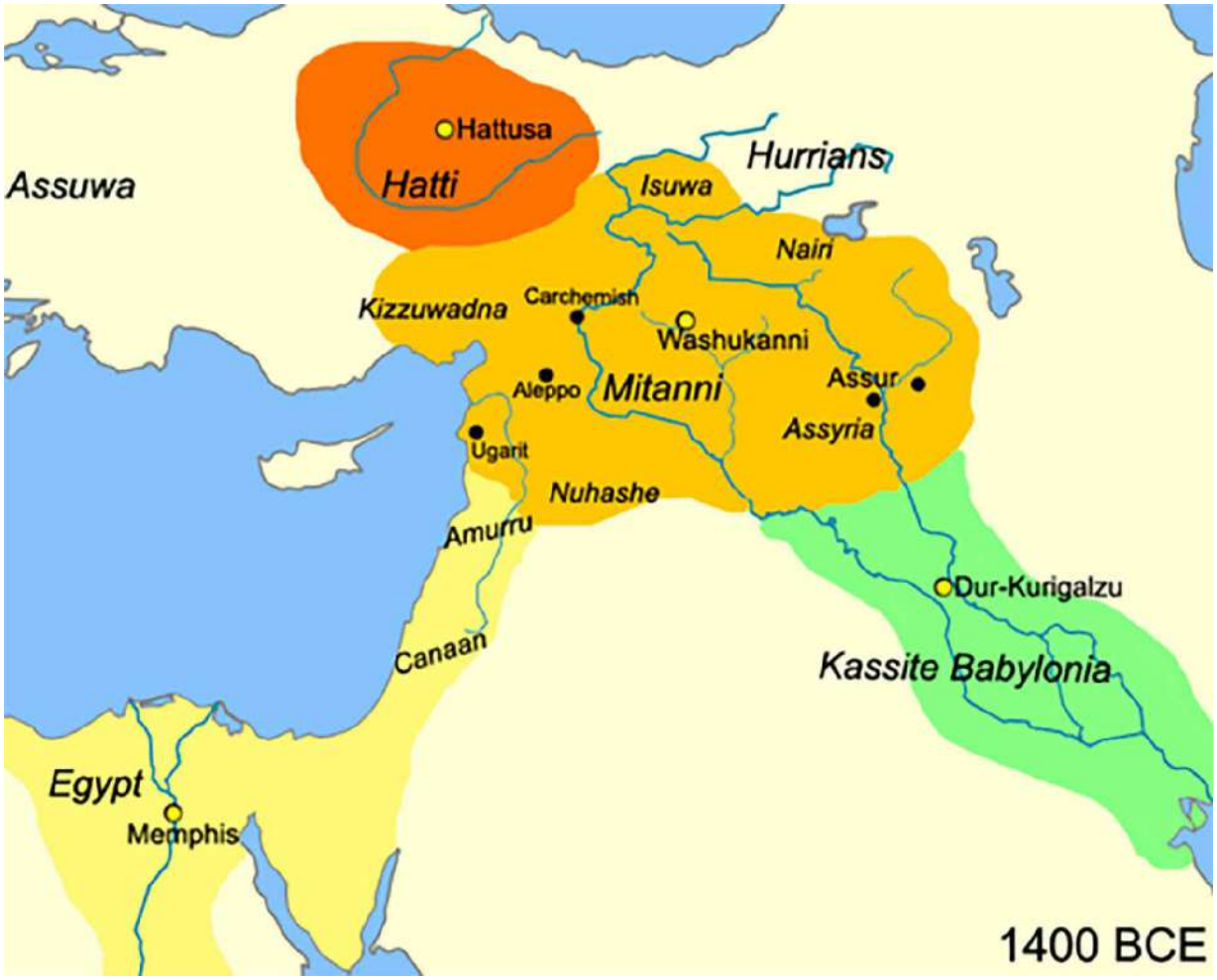
The next few centuries, which represent the end of the Old Assyrian Empire, did not see much in terms of imperial expansion. Not much is known about the kings who came after Adasi. His successor, Bel-Bani (c. 1700-1691 BCE) is credited with further victories over the Babylonians and Amorites (yet another group whose influence was expanding to the west of Assyria), and these victories are said to have helped Assyria maintain strong borders throughout this period of time.

After Bel-Bani came Libaya, who is said to have ruled over a relatively peaceful and stable Assyria, one that was largely left alone by its constantly warring neighbors. It's unclear if this is due to something Libaya did as a ruler, or if his time as king happened to coincide with a period of relative inactivity by the kingdoms of Mesopotamia. Most of the kings who ruled over the next few centuries are credited with minor military victories and also with improving the cities under Assyrian control, most notably Assur and Nineveh.

However, one reason why Assyrian expansion stalled during this period was due to the surprising, short-lived, yet decisive dominance by one of its neighbors, the Mitanni, who rose to dominance c. 1500 BCE and managed to secure a large section of Mesopotamian territory in a relatively short period of time. Little information exists about how the Mitanni were able to gain so much control so quickly. It seems as though they appeared out of thin air, but this is likely due to the lack of resources regarding this

kingdom. Nevertheless, they played an important role in shaping the region at this particular point in history.

At this particular moment, the Kassite dynasty was gaining influence in Babylon and once again expanding Babylonian influence in the region. With the Mitanni kingdom growing its power to the west, Assyria had become wedged between two stronger powers, resulting in Assur and other Assyrian territories falling briefly under Mitanni control. Figure 2 represents a rough outline of what the region would have looked like at this period in time:




Unsurprisingly, considering the extreme instability of the time, the Mitanni stronghold did not last long. The Hittites to the west launched an invasion under King Suppiluliuma I and managed to push the Mitannis back, replacing Mitanni leaders with Hittites. At the same time, Assyrian kings were able to gain influence at the Mitanni court (which was now mostly

controlled by Hittites), and this opened the door for the Assyrians to once again expand their influence in the territory surrounding Assur.

Figure 3 demonstrates how the political landscape of the region changed in just 50 short years. Assyria now has a clearly defined territory to call their own, and the Hittite kingdom has vastly expanded, leaving the Mitanni all but removed from the picture.

Historians generally use this moment to mark the close of the Old Assyrian Empire. Although Assyrian influence during this period pales in comparison to what it would be during future empires, its significance cannot be discounted.

It's during this time that Assyria began to establish itself as a power in the region. The fall of the Mitanni opened the door for the Assyrians to take control of the territory this short-lived kingdom had controlled, and because of a treaty arranged with the Kassite kings in Babylon, there was no overwhelming threat looming in the south. The military victories earned during this period of expansion were the building blocks for a tradition of war that would later spark fear in the hearts of other Mesopotamian civilizations, creating the opportunity for the Assyrians to become the region's most powerful people.

***The Middle Assyrian Empire***

The period of expansion that occurred after the fall of the Old Assyrian Empire would set Assyria up for long-term success. The Bronze Age collapse that occurred towards the end of the 2nd millennium BCE caused most Mesopotamian civilizations to all but disappear. However, due to the strength of the Assyrian Empire at the time of the collapse, they would survive, and this allowed them to emerge as the region's true hegemon. Yet before this could happen, the Assyrian Empire would go through a period of dramatic expansion and near collapse.

Around the year 1350 BCE, after the Assyrians managed to secure control over territory once controlled by the Mitannis and then the Hittites, the Hittites fought back, keeping the Assyrians at bay and preventing them from expanding any further. Eventually, Assyrian King Ashur-uballit I (c.1353-1318 BCE) was able to defeat the remaining Mitanni forces that were controlled by the Hittites. Two more kings—whose names are unknown—would come after Ashur-uballit I, but they would not succeed in extending the reaches of Assyrian territory. It wouldn't be until the rise of King Adad-nirari I (c. 1307-1275 BCE) that Assyria would began to dramatically expand. He managed to drive out the Hittites from their strongholds, taking control of some of their major cities in the meantime. This marks the first genuine expansion of Assyria beyond the territory surrounding Assur, giving them control over a significant chunk of land that stretched west into Anatolia .

Adad-nirari I began a policy of deportation that would become standard for most Assyrian rulers. As lands were conquered, he would systematically relocate large sections of the population. This decision proved to be an effective means for building an empire, as it gave leaders the chance to strategically distribute the population.

However, it's important to point out that the type of deportation that took place during the times of the Assyrians is not the same type of deportation we think of today. In modern times, this term conjures up images of people being ejected from their homes and in some cases being herded in large droves from one place to another—the American Trail of Tears, in which countless indigenous Americans were sent from their lands in the American South to barren reservations in the West, is a classic example—but this is not a fair depiction of the deportation practices carried out by Assyrian leaders.

In fact, Assyrian deportation was far more calculated. There is evidence to suggest that Assyrian leaders carefully planned out who they would send where, giving special attention to the needs of the country. Scribes and scholars were sent to urban centers where they could continue their studies, and other skilled craftsmen were sent where they would be able to use their skills most effectively. Not everyone was chosen to be deported, and families were rarely separated. Those who were left in their homes and who did not resist were, generally speaking, absorbed by Assyrian culture and over time would be treated as kin.

Obviously, loyalty to the Assyrian king, or emperor, was expected, and disloyalty would be punished, usually by deportation, execution, or enslavement. Because of the cruelty associated with these practices, and also because of the large-scale and forceful nature of Assyrian deportation policies, some modern scholars have compared Assyrian imperialism to that of the Nazis in the 20th century. Most scholars would agree, however, that this is not a fair comparison and actually paints an inaccurate picture of how Assyrian kings conducted business.

However, it would also be incorrect to portray this practice as evidence of overwhelming Assyrian benevolence. Those who resisted Assyrian rule, or who fought against deportation, were either executed or forced into slavery. This practice was in line with customs at the time. As a new king took control of a territory, he would demand those living there to declare fealty and those who did not would be punished so as to discourage future insurrections.

This policy of deportation introduced and carried out by King Adad-nirari I was one of the main reasons he was able to successfully conquer nearly the entire surrounding Mitanni kingdom. His son, Shalmaneser I, would continue in his father's footsteps, but it was Shalmaneser I's son, Tukulti-Ninurta I (c. 1244-1208 BCE), who would go further than any other Assyrian king had managed to do up until this point in time. He was a successful military king, but because he was interested in preserving and promoting a common Assyrian culture, his reign would lay the foundations for what would eventually become one of, if not the strongest, empire in ancient Mesopotamia.

Specifically, Tukulti-Ninurta I took on the responsibility of writing down some of his more significant conquests, laying the groundwork for a common Assyrian history, something of vital importance for empire

building. He also expanded upon the deportation system, being far more methodical in which person or community he chose to relocate, his goal being to try and maximize his conquests' ability to help grow Assyrian culture and influence.

However, for as influential as Tukulti-Ninurta I was in developing Assyrian culture, it was—as is the case for most of the Assyrian kings—his military success that defined his time as a ruler. He defeated the Hittites at the Battle of Nihriya in c. 1245 BCE, which effectively ended Hittite rule in the region, opening the door for the Assyrians to take control over much of Anatolia, the region where they had once traded but had since been locked out of due to growing Hittite influence.

Furthermore, Tukulti-Ninurta I was able to subjugate the Kassite king of Babylon, bringing the city and the territory it influenced under the control of the Assyrians. When Babylonians attempted to retake their land and even began to raid Assyrian-controlled territory, Tukulti-Ninurta I responded by sacking the city of Babylon. He destroyed many buildings, including sacred temples, and he enslaved significant portions of the city's population.

These campaigns meant that by the time of Tukulti-Ninurta I's death, the Assyrian Empire stretched across most of Mesopotamia, starting as far west as Carchemish and extending all the way down to Babylon. Figure 4 gives a snapshot of the estimated extent of the Assyrian Empire at this point in time. Babylon is not included on this map largely because it is unlikely Tukulti-Ninurta I would have been able to maintain control over the city for very long, something that will prove to be a trend throughout Assyrian history.

***The Bronze Age Collapse and the End of the Middle Assyrian Empire***

After Tukulti-Ninurta I's death, the Assyrian Empire stalled, falling victim to what historians call the Bronze Age collapse. This describes the period of time during the end of the 2nd millennium BCE where several large civilizations collapsed and eventually disappeared, being absorbed into larger and more powerful kingdoms. The effects of the Bronze Age collapse were felt in the civilizations spanning from Greece all the way to the western edges of what is now China.

There are a wide range of theories as to what caused the Bronze Age collapse. One such theory is that changes in climatic conditions dramatically affected the ability of these civilizations to produce food, which would have severely hindered their survival, let alone their expansion. Some of the evidence used to support this theory actually stems from the modern day. For example, a drought that hit Greece in the 1970s was the result of a climactic shift that produced unseasonably dry

conditions throughout much of the lands where the Bronze Age collapse existed. There is also a theory that the eruption of the Hekla 3 (H-3) volcano in Iceland in c. 1000 BCE impacted the region. Records from the times of Egyptian king Ramses III indicate the Egyptians blamed this explosion for the famines they were experiencing, and some climatologists believe the H-3 eruption may have created significant climactic challenges across the Northern Hemisphere that would have dramatically affected human civilizations around the world.

However, another theory that has gained a lot of traction among historians is that many of the civilizations that existed in this part of the world around 1200 BCE were still heavily dependent on bronze for the production of weapons and other tools. However, the development of iron working in present-day Romania and Bulgaria began a change in the way people made weapons and conducted warfare. Since the most abundant supplies of bronze in the area came from Afghanistan, it was a challenge to secure this resource, and around the time of the collapse, the relative cost of making weapons was rising dramatically.

This combined with the adoption of iron by several warrior tribes, such as the Sealanders, who occupied the territory surrounding the Black Sea, left many civilizations rather vulnerable to attack. As such, these tribes using newer, better weapons made of iron were able to overrun armies that otherwise would have no trouble dealing with them, contributing to the widespread decline of many civilizations in Mesopotamia and East Asia.

It's difficult to prove that any one of these theories is the direct cause of the collapse. And it's also infinitely more likely that it was a combination of all these different factors that led to the eventual demise of so many ancient civilizations. But no matter how, the reality is that only the kingdoms of Elam—which exists in what is present-day Iran, east of the Persian Gulf—and Assyria were able to emerge from the other side of the Bronze Age collapse. And for the Assyrians, this proved to be their shining moment, as they would enter the final millennium BCE poised to assume control of the largest swath of territory that they had ever controlled before.

But another reason why Assyria was able to emerge as such a powerful force after the collapse is that it never really went away. There is a relatively dark period in Assyrian history from the death of Tukulti-Ninurta I in c. 1208 BCE until the ascension of Tiglath Pileser I in c. 1115 BCE, and it is believed that during this period the Assyrian Empire shrank

considerably, losing control over many of the territories that Tukulti-Ninurta I and his predecessors had managed to conquer. But because the entire region was in a state of crisis, no other kingdom was able to establish any form of control or dominance over the people in Mesopotamia and abroad.

A lot would change, however, in 1115 BCE when Tiglath Pileser I took the Assyrian throne. Using the military, Tiglath Pileser I was able to revitalize the economy, adding resources to the empire and relocating populations in a strategic manner, a practice Assyrian kings had been using for some time. He also began building cities and roads. But perhaps his biggest cultural achievement was the collection of cuneiform tablets and scripts. This practice helped to significantly expand the literary tradition of Assyria, something that would continue all the way into the Late Assyrian Period with King Ashurbanipal's famous library in Nineveh.

Tiglath Pileser I's military campaigns also helped to extend the reaches of the Assyrian Empire further than any king had managed to do in the past. For the first time, Assyrian kings could claim dominion over the region known as Eber-Nari (the territory which stretches across modern-day Syria, Israel, and Lebanon), meaning Assyria had direct access to the Mediterranean Sea for the first time in its history.

However, as should be quite clear by now, a common theme in Assyrian history, and in that of Mesopotamia as a whole, is instability. The control the Assyrian Empire had over Mesopotamia at this point in time would be short-lived. Tiglath Pileser I died, and he was succeeded by his son, Asharid-apal-Ekur, who essentially extended the policies of his father, but who also only ruled for two years. Asharid-apal-Ekur's brother, Ashur-bel-Kala took over upon his brother's death, and although his reign started smoothly, it was soon cast into chaos as a usurper challenged the throne. He was ultimately unsuccessful, but the civil war that resulted from this action threw the empire into chaos and opened it up to challengers, who quickly moved to take over territory that Tiglath Pileser I had managed to conquer.

The first area to go was Eber-Nari, which the Aramaeans seized, removing Assyria's access to the valuable port cities on the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Mari and Babylon were once again rising in power, challenging Assyrian control in both the north and the south. During this period of turmoil, it was all Assyrian kings, including Tiglath Pileser II and Shalmaneser II, could do to maintain the core territories of the Assyrian

Empire, losing most of the territory that had been gained during the previous two and a half centuries.

This period marks the end of what is known as the Middle Assyrian Empire. It begins around the time the Assyrians fell under the control of the short-lived yet surprisingly expansive Mitanni Empire, witnesses the greatest imperial expansion to date, and then ends with the Assyrian kings clinging dearly to the territories surrounding Assur as foes from all sides began to strengthen and advance on Assyria. However, unlike the Old Assyrian Empire which entirely disappeared, the Middle Assyrian Empire would remain largely intact, setting the stage for the greatest period of Assyrian history in terms of territory controlled and military dominance. It's a period known as the Neo-Assyrian Empire, or in some cases, the Late Assyrian Empire.

However, before going too far into this era of Assyria, it's important to recap some of the common themes of the first millennium of Assyrian history. By now, it should be clear that military dominance is the secret to power in Mesopotamia. As the center of mass migration from both the East and the West, and also as one of the oldest inhabited parts of the globe, large, powerful cities popped up relatively close to each other. The fight for resources and glory was both bloody and constant.

Furthermore, rebellion was frequent, meaning leaders often needed to wage war to reconquer territories taken by the predecessors. Yet despite all this war, there were significant cultural and scientific advancements made, specifically the increasingly widespread use of writing, as well as the spread of iron working. All of this would set the stage quite nicely for the Neo-Assyrian Empire. History had taught them that to maintain control over a large expanse of territory, brutal and calculated military force would be needed, and as the calendar turned from 1000 BCE to 999 BCE, the Assyrian kings finally had the resolve and the technology to become one of the most powerful and influential empires ever to exist in the ancient world.

# Chapter 3 – The Beginning of the Neo-Assyrian Empire

The period of time from c. 911 BCE until c. 607 BCE is referred to as the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and it marks the most glorious period of the Assyrian Empire. It's during this time that the Assyrian Empire would grow to control what was then considered the "Four Corners of the World." Many may recognize this phrase from the Bible, and it was used to describe the territories bordered by some of the largest rivers in the ancient Near East, starting from the Gihon in Ethiopia to the Tigris in Assyria to the Euphrates in Armenia and ending with the Pishon in Havilah or Elam. It was to be the largest empire in ancient Mesopotamia, and it would also go down as one of the most brutal, with comparisons often being made between the famous kings of Assyria and some of the world's other most well-known yet ruthless leaders, such as Genghis Khan. Xerxes, and Adolf Hitler.

However, many historians will take issue with comparing these ancient rulers to the likes of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. No one in history has matched the brutality carried out by Hitler in Europe and on the world's Jewish population, and these ancient rulers, including those in Assyria, were using tactics typical in a time when warfare, slavery, and deportation were the normal modes of establishing and maintaining power. Were they brutal compared to modern standards? Yes. But they were no more brutal than the Romans, who would line roads with crosses where those who refused to submit were crucified.

The point here is to point out the significance of context. For Assyria, the expansion that took place in this last part of their history was motivated, as one might expect, by financial desire. The reign of Tiglath Pileser I taught Assyrian kings that war, through the bounty it brought in, was highly profitable. And since Assyrian kings were like most other kings of the time, they viewed themselves as extensions of the gods. Building large palaces and surrounding themselves with tremendous wealth was an effective means of communicating this to their subjects. This expansion of wealth, plus military victory, was the source of power for Assyrian kings, and when combined with the greed and ambition of human beings, it created the perfect recipe for a powerful empire.

However, it is important to not write off Assyrian imperial expansion during this time period as the mere desire of kings to enrich themselves. There were strategic reasons as well. Trade was of utmost importance to the Assyrians, and at the beginning of the 10th century BCE, this was in danger. Tribes, mainly different groups of Aramaeans, blocked or threatened trade routes through the Zagros Mountains, stalling trade with Anatolia, and to the south, the Aramaeans were threatening to close off trade with cities near the Persian Gulf.

At the end of the 10th century BCE, Assyria controlled a territory that stretched no more than 1,600 km (1,000 miles) wide and 800 km (500 miles) wide. Yet Assyrian cities were strong and closely connected. And as compared to the other major actors in the region, it was the best positioned to be able to significantly expand. Egypt was essentially powerless, controlled largely by Libyan kings, and other kingdoms, such as the Medians and Persians in Iran, were still too far away to be much of a threat, and in Armenia, Urartu, a kingdom that would rise to power over the course of this millennium, was not yet powerful. So, even though Assyrian territory at the turn of the 10th century was small, the stage was set. And as powerful and cunning kings came to the throne in relative succession, Assyria's influence in the region expanded rapidly.

Expansion began just beyond Assyrian territory and extended slowly. However, as Assyria expanded, it would come into contact with increasingly powerful enemies, making it increasingly difficult for Assyrian kings to maintain control over their territory. Territories that were conquered were lost to revolt, and internal turmoil slowed down the Assyrian march across the Mesopotamian plains.

Nevertheless, over the course of the next 350 years, Assyria would become the superpower in Mesopotamia and abroad. But to secure this position, Assyria and its people would be in a state of perennial war, a constant in any story of imperial conquest, past or present.

### *An Empire Awakening: The Reemergence of the Assyrians*

The ascension of King Adad-nirari II generally marks the beginning of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. It was at this time that Assyria "awoke" and began to expand beyond the territory immediately surrounding Assur. Most of Adad-nirari II's campaigns consisted of retaking territories that had been lost after Tiglath Pileser I, most notably the Eber-Nari, the territory covering Israel,

Syria, and Lebanon. He was then able to secure these borders by sending Assyrian governors to oversee these territories with Assyrian troops and also executed resistors or deported them to the heartland of the empire where they could be more easily controlled.

Additional campaigns helped secure territories in Kurdistan (northern Iraq and

Southeastern Turkey). However, one of Adad-nirari II's most significant

An accomplishment was in fact not a military conquest but rather a treaty. After defeating the Babylonian king Shamash-mudammiq twice, the Assyrian king was able to take control of large swaths of northern Babylonian territory. When a new Babylonian king took the throne, Adad-nirari II was less successful in his conquests, but he was able to arrange a treaty which ensured peace between the two kingdoms for the next 80 years. This is significant because it meant Assyrian kings did not need to worry about their powerful southern neighbors, freeing them up to focus on campaigns throughout the Levant and Canaan.

In 890 BCE, Tukulti-Ninurta II took the throne, but he would only rule for six years. During this time, he was unable to significantly expand the borders of the empire, but he did manage to expand the royal holdings in Assur, rebuilding the city's walls. The few campaigns he did conduct managed to win over the support of the Aramaeans to the south and west of Assur, further strengthening Assyrian control over Mesopotamia. In 893 BCE, Tukulti-Ninurta II died, and he turned the kingdom—which was rapidly becoming a powerful empire—over to his son, Ashurbanipal II, who would be the first in a long line of Assyrian kings who are now considered to be among the most powerful and ruthless leaders in history.

Upon taking the throne, Ashurbanipal II immediately set out on what would become a series of military campaigns. He began by venturing into the mountains north of Assur, clearing the region of tribes and asserting his dominance. He then immediately turned his attention to the west, setting his sights, as so many other great Assyrian rulers did, on the Mediterranean and the riches it promised, securing more territory across Syria and Lebanon in the meantime. After his successes there, he turned back towards Assyria, establishing Assyrian dominance in the territory surrounding the Euphrates River.

If compared to the kings that would come after Ashurbanipal II, the amount of territory he added to the empire was relatively small. However, his contribution to consolidating previous gains and establishing further dominance cannot be overlooked. The bounties and tributes he acquired as a result of his conquests added significantly to the riches of the empire and it helped to reshape the geopolitical situation in the region, specifically the ascension of the Assyrians as one of the dominant powers in Mesopotamia. But perhaps the most significant development to come out of Ashurbanipal II's reign was that the Assyrians kings now had the reputation for leading brutal, ruthless military campaigns, and the thought of a strengthening and mobilizing Assyrian army would have struck fear into the hearts of all kings in the area, no matter the size or strength of their kingdom.

However, for as important as Ashurbanipal II's foreign policy was, he also contributed to domestic growth, largely by building. His most storied building project was his palace. Most Mesopotamian monarchs had an insatiable thirst for building, as they saw this as a way of establishing their demigod status and legitimacy to rule. Part of the regal duties of an Assyrian king was to make sure the temples and other religious buildings of the two major Assyrian cities, Assur and Nineveh, were properly maintained and expanded upon. And while Ashurbanipal II did not overlook this responsibility, he decided to build his palace in Calah—the city referred to as Nimrud in the Bible—as his capital.

Some historians wonder if this was chosen because it was better defended; Assur was dangerously exposed to attacks from the west, and it's reasonable to wonder if Ashurbanipal II chose Calah because it did not possess these same vulnerabilities. But no matter the reason, Ashurbanipal II's palace is considered to be one of the most formidable of any of the palaces built by Assyrian kings.

Ashurbanipal II was succeeded by Shalmaneser III in 858 BCE, and his reign would be nearly entirely defined by war. In total, he found himself off campaigning and conquering for 31 of the 34 years he spent as king, a remarkable number even by Assyrian standards.

During this time, Assyrian soldiers managed to go further than any Assyrians had managed to go before. They entered and received tribute from kings and princes in Armenia, Cilicia, Palestine, and all the way down to some of the kingdoms traditionally loyal to the Babylonian throne, nearly reaching the shores of the Persian Gulf. In the process of doing this, he

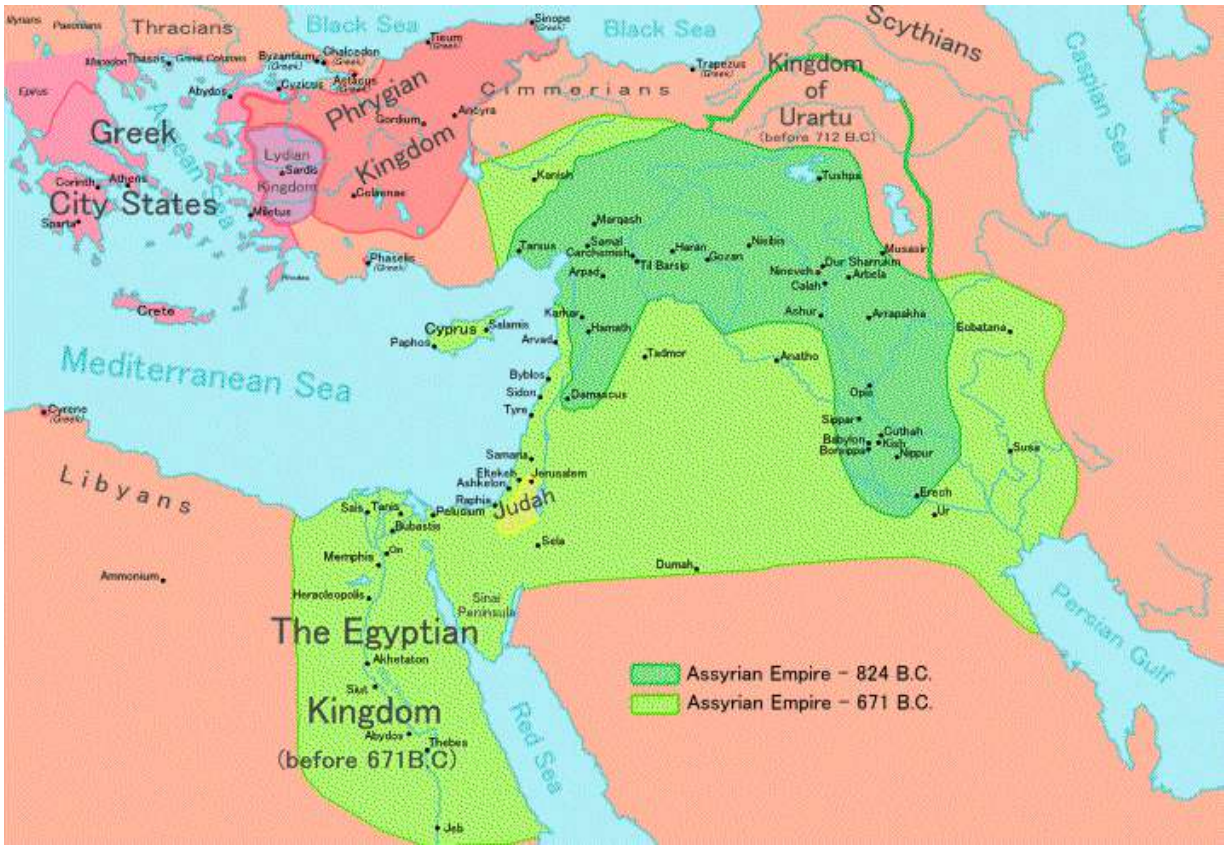
managed to quell rebellions and further fortify the territories conquered by his father.

However, Shalmaneser III's reign would prove to be a turning point in Assyrian history, largely because of the difficulty in attempting to conquer ever more powerful enemies. Many Assyrian kings before Shalmaneser III attempted to conquer all of Syria and its capital city, Damascus. But they were nearly always unsuccessful, and Shalmaneser III would fall to a similar fate. He launched several campaigns into Syria against multiple different cities, but he was eventually forced to accept defeat.

In the south, though, Shalmaneser III would see far more success, as he was able to bring the city of Babylon under Assyrian control. During the initial part of his rule, he left this once powerful kingdom to the south alone, due to the treaty signed earlier that century, so that Babylon could have the chance to deal with its own security threats. However, when rebellion broke out and the Babylonian kings called upon the support of Shalmaneser III and the Assyrians, he took this as a chance to extend the Assyrian kingdom further to the south.

But even though Shalmaneser III was able to expand the reaches of Assyrian power, some historians suggest that he did not go as far as he most likely could have. By dedicating so much time and energy in attempting to conquer Syria, it's believed he missed out on the opportunity to further extend the kingdom to the south. In fact, at the end of Shalmaneser III's reign in 824 BCE, most still consider Assyria to be not much more than a large northern Mesopotamian kingdom.

Figure 5 gives an idea as to the extent of Assyria at the time Shalmaneser III died and turned the kingdom over to his son, although it is not entirely accurate as it shows Damascus under Assyrian control. This did not happen until Adad-nirari III took the throne and became old enough to carry out his duties as king. This map also shows what the Assyrian Empire looked like at the peak of its dominance. And while in 824 it was by far the most powerful kingdom in Mesopotamia, internal strife would prevent it from expanding much further for another 25 years.




***Rebellion and Imperial Stagnation***

Shortly before the death of Shalmaneser III, one of his sons, Ashur-danin-aplu, with the support of some 27 cities, revolted against the king. However, at this point, Shalmaneser III was too old to deal with the rebellion on his own, so he appointed his crown prince, Shamshi-Adad, to deal with the insurrection. This inner struggle for control of the Assyrian Empire started a civil war that would continue after Shalmaneser III died in 824, which led to the official ascension of Shamshi-Adad, who was to be known as Shamshi-Adad V.

While the rebellion halted the imperial expansion of Assyria, it wasn't a traditional crisis in that it did not dramatically alter the power structures of the kingdom. No one was looking to overthrow the king. Instead, the purpose of the rebellion was to shed light on some of the corrupt practices of provincial governors who had gone too far and attempted to assume too much power. The insurgents wanted a king who would be able to bring order to a situation that was becoming increasingly out of hand.

Yet even though no one sought the removal of the king, it still took Shamshi-Adad five years to quell the rebellions that had broken out in cities

all over the kingdom. But part of the reason this took so long was that princes and kings, especially those in the mountainous regions near Armenia, took advantage of Assyrian weakness to withhold tribute and forgo Assyrian "protection," meaning Shamshi-Adad had to campaign to once again reassert control over territory recently conquered by his predecessors.

This proved to be challenging as Urartu, a kingdom in Armenia, was slowly gaining more and more power. In retrospect, this is a foreboding occurrence, as Urartu would prove to be one of Assyria's main foes throughout its period of imperial dominance.

Shamshi-Adad's reign did not last long, and it was almost entirely defined by the rebellion in 827 BCE and the subsequent war needed to stop it. When he died in 810 BCE, he had managed to add no new territory to the empire. But his rule was not in vain, as he restored order and set his son up to continue the military conquest of Mesopotamia and beyond.

When Shamshi-Adad died in 810, his son, Adad-nirari III, was too young to take power. His mother, Sammuramat, also known as Semiramis, took over as regent. For reasons unknown to historians, Semiramis has become the center of many legends. Different traditions, ranging from Greek mythology to Iranian lore, speak of an Assyrian goddess queen who accomplished great, if not magical, feats. It's unknown where these legends come from, although some theories suggest she may have led Assyrian troops to victory against the Medes and that this inserted her name into folklore, which was then distorted and spread throughout time. But it's difficult, if not impossible, to validate these claims.

Part of the reason it's so surprising that Semiramis is such a legendary figure is that her time as queen was relatively uneventful. During this time, no significant gains were made to the empire, and there were no excessive threats to stability. It seems as though the entire kingdom was simply waiting for Adad-nirari III to come of age and begin his rule.

His first year as king was four years after his father's death, 806 BCE, and soon after he became king he launched a series of military campaigns that, although promising, would not offer much in terms of building and expanding the empire.

Adad-nirari III started by finishing the job his grandfather had failed to complete; he invaded Syria and imposed tributes upon the Neo-Hittites,

Phoenicians, Philistines, Israelites, and Edomites. He triumphed in invading and conquering, meaning that he successfully exacted tribute from its ruler, the city of Damascus, and the territories it controlled. Adad-nirari III also entered territories controlled by the Medians to the northeast and the Persians to the east. Assyrian legend indicates that these leaders fell to their knees to submit to the Assyrians, but this version of events has long since been rebuked. In fact, the military campaigns of Adad-nirari III can best be described as unusually successful raids, not genuine conquest, and Adad-nirari III's reign signals the start of a period of imperial decline.

All four of Adad-nirari III's sons would become kings, starting with Shalmaneser IV, who became king in 782 BCE and ruled for nine years until 773 BCE. During the time of Shalmaneser IV and his three brothers, the most important development in Assyrian history actually took place outside Assyria. The kingdom of Urartu had grown quite powerful and had established strongholds in both Syria and Iran. Several expeditions by the Assyrian kings who ruled for most of the 8th century BCE were stunted by Urartian forces, and this prevented Assyria from adding meaningful territory to their empire.

This period of Assyrian history is known as the Interval, as it marks a break in the action after the influential reigns of Ashurbanipal II and Shalmaneser III. However, the Interval is not much more than a blip on the radar, and this period of imperial stagnation would end when Tiglath Pileser III comes to the throne in 744 BCE, launching the final yet most glorious stage of the Assyrian Empire.

# Chapter 4 – Imperial Expansion and the Golden Age of the Neo-Assyrian Empire

The next four kings to take the Assyrian throne would preside over the most significant period of Assyrian imperial history, but they would also bring it to the brink of collapse. The first two kings, Tiglath Pileser III and Sargon II, would achieve significant military victories, expanding the territory controlled by the Assyrians to its largest point at any time before. They would give way to Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, who would consolidate and build upon these gains—largely through the conquest of Egypt—and contribute significantly to Assyrian cultural development. At the end of Esarhaddon's rule, the Assyrian Empire was larger than at any other time in its history. And while this moment could be considered high point of the Assyrian Empire, it was also the beginning of the end.

The vast majority of Assyria's expansion took place to the north, northwest, and west of Assur and. The lack of a genuine superpower in these regions meant that the Assyrians were free during this period to wage wars that frequently resulted in victory, and this allowed them to expand their influence over an immense piece of land stretching from Egypt to the Persian Gulf.

However, this is not to say their expansion was easy, and it's not meant to take anything away from the military prowess of the leaders during the time of expansion and consolidation. But it's worth mentioning, as it's unlikely Assyria would have been able to expand to the extent that it did had it been forced to focus on its southern borders.

Babylon, which lie on the southern side of the Fertile Crescent, had been a power since Hammurabi took the Babylonian throne at the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, and its position of dominance would not waver significantly during the time in which Assyria was forming into a distinguishable country and formidable regional power.

As such, the history of the Neo-Assyrian Empire is closely tied to how the Assyrian kings dealt with the question of Babylon. As ambitious conquerors, nearly all Assyrian kings wanted to claim some degree of control over Babylon and the many cities paying tribute to it, but most were fearful of direct military action against their southern neighbors. Assyrian involvement in Babylonian affairs usually took place as a result of rebellion or as a result

of overly-ambitious Babylonian kings. These ambitious kings thought they could catch Assyria by surprise while its attention was directed elsewhere in the Near East and subsequently either challenge Assyrian authority in the region, or even invade and conquer areas much closer to the Assyrian imperial center.

Nevertheless, the fate of the Late Assyrian Empire is tied to how it dealt with its southern neighbors. The ascension of Tiglath Pileser III marks the beginning of a century of Assyrian involvement in Babylonian affairs, which would range from a system of indirect rule to one outright plundering of the city. These decisions by ambitious Assyrian kings would ultimately prove folly, as the instability that came along with Babylonian resistance to Assyrian rule was at the core of imperial decline.

The relationship between Babylonia and Assyria is described in detail in Chapter 5, recounting the history from the ascension of Tiglath Pileser III until the fall of Assyria at the Siege of Harran in 627. The following chapter deals with the expansion of the Assyrian army to the west, north, and northwest, as Assyrian kings, mainly Tiglath Pileser III and Sargon II, began to exert genuine control over the regions of Palestine, Anatolia, Urartu, Phoenicia, and eventually Egypt.

While several other kings would follow these two infamous monarchs, their imperial gains—aside from the brief subjugation of the kingdom of Egypt—were far more modest, and internal strife would eventually rock the empire at its core and bring it to its knees.

### *Tiglath Pileser III: Bringing the Empire to the Egyptian Border*

The story of Tiglath Pileser III's ascension to the throne in 744 BCE is one shrouded in mystery. There appears to have been a revolution, which resulted in Tiglath Pileser III being named king, but very little is known about his parentage and what claim he may have actually had to the throne.

The two leading theories are that this absence of information is merely an error in recording and that there is in fact a direct lineage with former Assyrian kings, as Tiglath Pileser III claimed to have be one of the sons of Adad-nirari, which could have only been Adad-nirari III. The other conjecture is that the discrepancy surrounding Tiglath Pileser III is the result of a deliberate misinterpretation designed to obscure the truth regarding how he became king.

However, neither theory has ever been able to be proven, as no reliable source exists that supports one theory over the other. But no matter how he

came to the throne, there is no doubt that Tiglath Pileser III was one of Assyria's greatest kings. His time as ruler began an unprecedented period of imperial expansion that would see the Assyrian Empire extend as far west as Egypt and as far east as Babylon.

When Tiglath Pileser III became king, though, the greatest threat to Assyrian dominance was the kingdom of Urartu, which lay to the north of Assyria in the mountainous region that is now Armenia. Texts from the time of Tiglath Pileser III's ascension suggest that he thought of this territory as being Assyrian for a long time, meaning he would have felt a responsibility to defend it and keep it under Assyrian control. But because Assyrian kings had been more concerned with expansion to the west, Assyrian political control in the territory to the north of Assyria had weakened, with many cities and kingdoms changing changed by either declaring fealty to the Urartu kingdom or maintaining their own independence.

Through the first ten years of Tiglath Pileser III's reign, he was largely preoccupied with retaking some of the territories that had fallen out of Assyrian control during the Interval period. He set out on campaigns that ended with him securing tribute from cities throughout Upper Mesopotamia, such as Carchemish, Milid, Gurgum, Tabal, Kaska, and Que. He also ran raids throughout Babylonia and deported large groups of Aramaeans into the newly acquired Syrian provinces.

By 735, Tiglath Pileser III believed he had done enough in terms of surrounding the Urartu kingdom to warrant a full-scale invasion. The attack consisted of a direct assault on the capital city of the Urartu kingdom, Tushpa, which can be found directly north of Assur in the Zagros Mountains (see Figure 5).

The success of this campaign speaks to two significant developments in the Assyrian Empire. The first is that it demonstrated the prowess of Tiglath Pileser III as a military commander. That he was able to retake the territory lost during the Interval and topple what had become the most powerful kingdom in upper Mesopotamia in a period of just ten years speaks to the careful planning, strategic insight, and political acumen of the Assyrian king. He was able to form alliances, subject kingdoms, and prepare his army for an ambitious invasion that went surprisingly well.

The second is that it established what would come to be the trademark of Assyrian military tactics: the siege. This is when an army sets up outside a city, stopping all movement in and out of it, effectively starving the

population and reducing its will to survive so much that they have no other choice but to submit. The Assyrian treatment of kings and other nobility who resisted invasion and then eventually lost their city through siege was particularly harsh and it's part of what gave Assyrian kings the reputation for being so cruel. It would not be uncommon for the Assyrian army to kill the king of the conquered city, flay his skin, and put him on display so as to signal to the local population what happened if they resist Assyrian rule.

While this might seem harsh as compared to modern standards, terror was a regular form of coercion in ancient times. Relatively ineffective political institutions meant that leaders had to rely on fear as a means of bringing populations under their control. However, whether these actions were warranted or not is not really the issue at hand. The important thing to remember is that Assyrian tactics were successful in striking fear in the hearts of their opponents, and this seemed to be particularly successful during the reigns of the kings starting with Tiglath Pileser III and continuing on until the end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

With the north and west now firmly under his control, Tiglath Pileser III was free to pursue an ambition that many Assyrian kings before him had desired but had failed to acquire: Southern Syria and Egypt.

At this point in time, after hearing about the many victories of Tiglath Pileser III and his armies, many of the major Syrian cities, including Damascus, had voluntarily submitted to tribute, meaning Tiglath Pileser III did not need to occupy himself with the conquest of these territories and could instead continue south. In 734 BCE, he marched into Gaza, plundering it upon conquest, and began to set his sights further south and to the west—towards Egypt—but was forced to slow down and instead tend to rebellions that were breaking out throughout Syria.

Several years of war ensued, including multiple failed attempts to sack Damascus. However, by 732 BCE, the Assyrian army's siege of Damascus finally succeeded, and the city was made a province of the Assyrian Empire. By the end of 732 BCE, Tiglath Pileser III was able to return to his ambitions of conquering Egypt and was mildly successful, establishing strongholds along the Egyptian border; in doing so, he received tribute from several Arab tribes and kingdoms on the Sinai Peninsula.

These campaigns resulted in the annexation of large swaths of territory stretching far into what was by now the former Urartu kingdom in the north and Phoenicia and the Sinai Peninsula in the west. Brief expeditions were

made to expand the Assyrian Empire to the east, which resulted in confrontations with different forces associated with the Median kingdom. Tiglath Pileser III achieved mild success, but the expansion of territory was nothing compared to what he was able to do in the west.

And it was at this time that Tiglath Pileser III began to become more involved with Babylon, which lies to the south of Assyria. Babylon is a city in Southern Mesopotamia that had been a considerable force in the area since the time of Hammurabi, controlling not only the territory surrounding the city, but also the lands that extended through Southern Mesopotamia, reaching the Persian Gulf. The term "Babylon" typically refers to the entire state, meaning the city of Babylon itself and the network of other cities and territories that had declared loyalty to the Babylonian king and/or were paying tribute to him. Assyrian campaigns into Babylon and relations with its kings are described in the following section, largely because the fate of Assyria was nearly always tied to how it managed its powerful neighbor to the south. Attempts to submit the Babylonian kings to Assyrian rule would be one of the primary reasons for the eventual downfall of the Assyrian Empire.

Tiglath Pileser III's reign marks a significant moment in Assyrian history. It represents the end of the Interval period where Assyrian control in the region had all but disappeared, but more importantly, it added huge chunks of territory to the Assyrian Empire.

The kings that would come after Tiglath Pileser III were largely able to maintain control over these territories and expand upon them. But, unlike Tiglath Pileser III, future kings, benefiting from the conquest and consolidation of previous Assyrian kings, were freed from the need to spend their entire reign campaigning and conquering lands previously lost or in open rebellion to Assyrian rule. As a result, they were able to invest significantly in the cultural development of the empire, something that would help entrench the Assyrians deep into the annals of world history.

### *The Reign of Sargon II: The Empire Expands Further*

After Tiglath Pileser III died in 726 BCE, his son, Shalmaneser V, came to the Assyrian throne. However, his reign was short, and not much is really known about his achievements. Much of what is known about the Assyrian kings comes from detailed accounts written by the king and his army of scribes during and after military campaigns. Since Shalmaneser V's reign

was so short, he did not really have the time to conduct the types of campaigns that were worthy of historical documentation.

The only known achievement of any significance attributed to Shalmaneser V is the conquest of Samaria, a province in northern Israel. However, perhaps more importantly, the Assyrian Empire suffered no major setbacks during this time, allowing the next king, Sargon II, to expand upon the empire even further and bring the empire to new levels of glory and fame.

Much like Tiglath Pileser III, Sargon II's ascension to the throne in 721 BCE is a subject up for debate. There is no mention of his father in any of the royal inscriptions left behind, and the name Sargon translates from Assyrian into "legitimate king," leading many to believe he may have been a usurper who chose a royal name so as to hide his suspect manner of coming to power.

The confusion that resulted from Sargon II becoming the Assyrian king once again gave the Syrian provinces an opening to rebel, yet they were once again stopped. After a brief campaign in Babylon, Sargon II returned to the west to bring these insurgents back under Assyrian control, and as early as the next year (720 BCE), he had managed to bring the rebellion down by winning a decisive battle at Qarqar in Syria.

After Qarqar, Sargon II continued south to retake Gaza and to continue advancing towards the Egyptian border. A battle was fought between the Egyptians and Sargon II's Assyrians at Raphia, which Sargon II won, bringing a small section of Egyptian territory under Assyrian control.

Sargon II continued further into Egyptian territory, and fearful of his powerful army, the Egyptian pharaoh at the time, Osorkon IV, sent gifts and established peaceful relations with the Assyrian king. The two kingdoms would then enter into a period of free trade from which both sides benefited. During this time, Sargon II was also able to take control of significant territory that had once belonged to the Arabs, and in an effort to consolidate his power, he deported many Arabs to other parts of the empire, specifically Samaria.

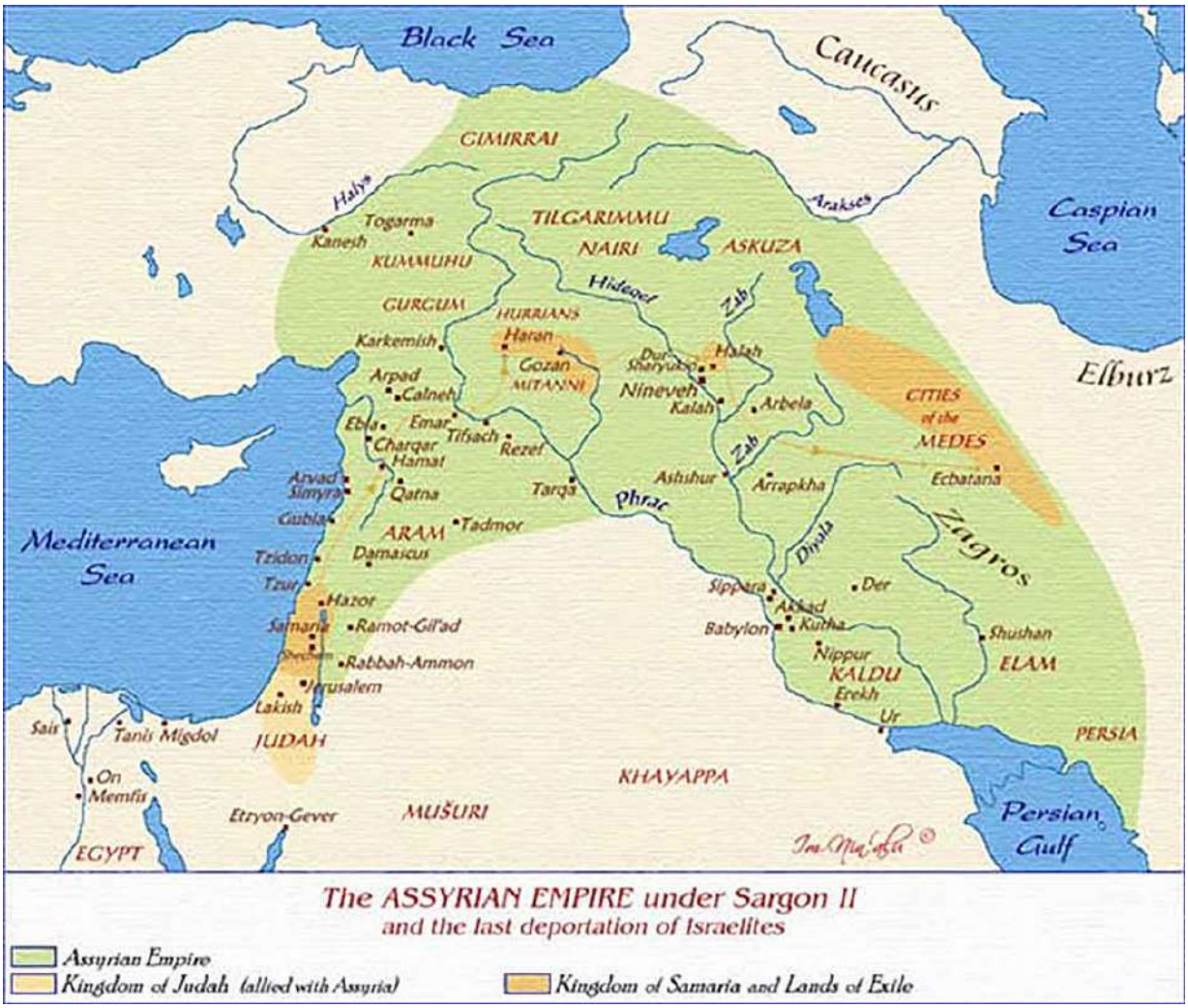
Throughout the rest of Sargon II's reign, he would achieve two major victories: the defeat of the Urartu to the north of Assyria and the subjugation of Babylon. In doing this and by establishing peaceful relations with two powerful neighbors—Egypt to the southwest and Phrygia in Anatolia—Sargon II was able to consolidate the gains made by Tiglath Pileser III while expanding considerably upon imperial possessions in nearly all directions.

At this point in history, the Assyrian Empire was larger than it had ever been before, and the highly successful military campaigns of both Tiglath Pileser III and Sargon II had earned the Assyrians quite the reputation in the ancient Near East. No one was willing to attempt to topple the Assyrians completely on their own. Enemies would either rely on weaker vassals in buffer territories to bear the brunt of Assyrian aggression, or they would have to band together to stand a chance at stopping the Assyrians.

At times, this was successful, a good example being when Babylon and Elam worked together to drive the Assyrians from southern Mesopotamia, but other times it was not, resulting in harsh punishment of those who dared work against the Assyrian kings.

In addition to his military accomplishments, Sargon II made significant additions to the cultural development of the empire, largely through the founding of a completely new city, Dur-Sharrukin. The city was essentially named after Sargon himself, and it was home to one of the largest temples ever constructed by an Assyrian king. Other Assyrian kings are given credit for vastly improving upon existing Assyrian cities such as Assur, Nineveh, and Calah, but only Sargon II can take credit for founding a completely new city entirely dedicated to a celebration of his power and glory, something that would have helped demonstrate his demigod status to his subjects.

Part of the allure of Sargon II was that he would fight his own battles. He left his son and crown prince Sennacherib in Assur to govern over domestic affairs while he conducted extensive military campaigns abroad. Yet this would ultimately prove to be his downfall, for he died in battle in 705, abruptly ending his campaign and reign. However, Sargon II, along with Tiglath Pileser III, can claim to have made the most significant expansions of the Assyrian Empire up to this point in history. Figure 6 represents the extent of the Assyrian Empire after Sargon II’s reign.




The two kings to follow, Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, would spend most of their reigns building up the empire from within, dedicating significant resources to cultural development, although some major military campaigns would help to expand the empire's reach.

### *Sennacherib: The Sacking of Babylon, Consolidation in the West, and the Advancement of Nineveh*

Details from the time of Sennacherib indicate that he was deeply troubled by his father's death in battle. This was extremely rare, and most people, particularly Sennacherib, saw this as a bad omen, and speculated that his time as king would be cursed or doomed. This may explain why, after ascending to the throne in 705 BCE, he was less inclined than his father to launch extensive military campaigns, choosing instead to focus on domestic affairs.

However, this does not mean that Sennacherib did not activate the Assyrian military machine. The two most significant campaigns conducted during his rule were in the west, in Palestine, and in the south, in Babylon. But neither campaign would yield much in terms of territorial expansion, serving instead to quell rebellions and consolidate power.

Of the two campaigns, though, the one in Babylon would prove to have the most significant long-term effects for the empire. Babylon and Assyria had always maintained relatively peaceful relations. Although Assyria would always be on the lookout for opportunities to assert influence over Babylonian affairs, a shared culture, specifically a shared religion, tied the two civilizations together and encouraged a healthy relationship.

But this changed when the Babylonian king, Merodach-baladan, who long had support in his anti-Assyrian campaigns from the Babylonian people, launched a rebellion in c. 700. While this was handled peacefully by Sennacherib, his decision to be lenient would ultimately backfire as another rebellion would break out in c. 689 under the leadership of Babylonian king Mushezib-Marduk.

This time, angry that the Babylonians had not submitted after the first rebellion, Sennacherib decided to sack Babylon, something few, if any, Assyrian kings had ever dared to do. While it was a successful tactic for bringing the Babylonian people back under Assyrian control, this stoked hostilities in Babylon towards the Assyrian that would escalate and eventually spark the military alliances that would bring Assyria down. However, Sennacherib had no way of knowing the effect of his actions, and at the time, the addition of Babylon to the Assyrian Empire was seen as a great victory.

However, perhaps the most significant of all of Sennacherib's achievements had nothing to do with conquest or campaigning. During his time as king, Sennacherib embarked on several monumental building projects, most notably the expansion of his palace at Nineveh. At the time of its completion, the palace boasted a large park and a system of artificial irrigation.

Throughout his reign, Sennacherib would build upon this great achievement while also expanding on other aspects of the city, building up its defenses, constructing temples, and turning Nineveh into the leading metropolis of the empire. Building seems to have been a great passion for Sennacherib, as he began construction on the palace in c. 703 BCE, almost immediately after

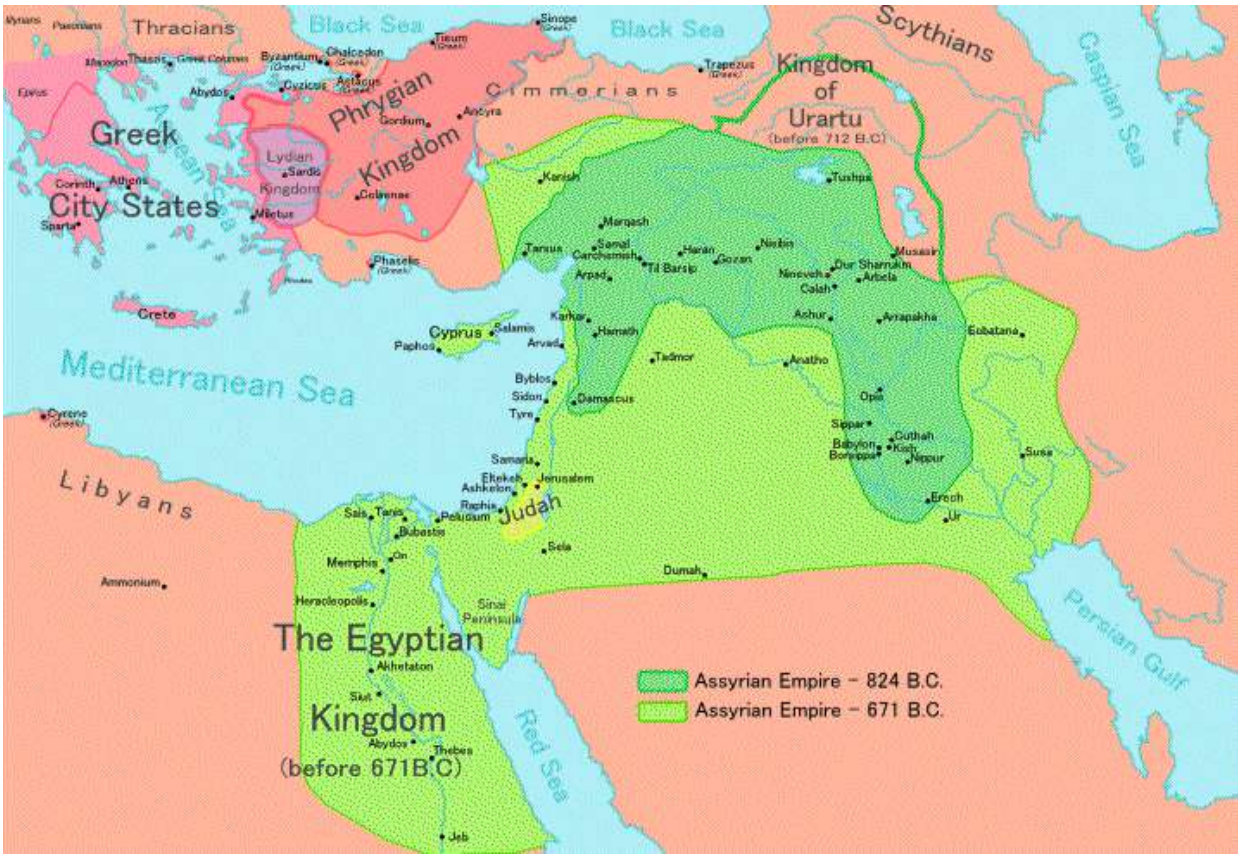
assuming the throne, and he was known for having personally overseen the construction of many of the great construction projects he commissioned.

Compared to his father, Sargon II, and Tiglath Pileser III, Sennacherib did little in terms of expanding the empire, but his contribution to its growth cannot be understated. His major military campaign in Palestine successfully fortified the empire's borders, and some of his smaller campaigns in Anatolia achieved the same effect. However, his reign would end abruptly when he was assassinated in c. 681 BCE. His son, Esarhaddon, would take the throne and embark upon the last major chapter of Assyrian expansion, including perhaps its greatest achievement, the invasion of Egypt.

***Esarhaddon: Setting the Stage for the Conquest of Egypt***

Egypt had long been the desire of Assyrian imperial ambition, and when Esarhaddon took the throne in 681 BCE, the stage was well set for him to accomplish this goal. As one of the most powerful kingdoms in antiquity, the conquest of Egypt was sure to bring about great glory for the king who managed to do it. However, to succeed with an invasion of Egypt, it was essential to have complete control of Syria and Palestine, for these territories would serve as a staging ground for the attack. Furthermore, the Assyrians would need the assistance of Arab armies in the Sinai Peninsula to be able to make any meaningful headway into Egyptian territory.

Esarhaddon was the Assyrian king best equipped to make this invasion. The conquests of Tiglath Pileser III and Sargon II had expanded Assyrian control deep into Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine, and Esarhaddon's predecessor, Sennacherib, had succeeded in fortifying these territories.




However, none of these three kings were able to move beyond the Egyptian border. Tiglath Pileser III and Sargon II had made treaties with the Egyptians, leading to a period of peace and free trade, but by the time of Esarhaddon, these were breaking down. The rebellions that periodically broke out in Palestine and Phoenicia were typically supported by the Egyptians, souring relations between Egypt and Assyria, two of the great powers in the region and giving the Assyrians even more motivation for launching a full-scale invasion of Egypt.

Esarhaddon took this moment as the opportunity to once and for all invade the kingdom of Egypt, a campaign that was met with varying success. He was, unlike any other king before him, able to cross into Egyptian territory and win several decisive battles inside Egyptian territory. There are several other records of the Assyrian armies coming into contact with the Egyptians, but these campaigns are the most notable, as they resulted in tributary arrangements that placed more Egyptian territory under Assyrian control than ever before. Instead of securing border territories and arranging peace treaties, Esarhaddon was able to claim firm control of cities previously under Egyptian rule. As such, most historians consider this time, roughly 671 BCE, as the point in history where Assyria conquered Egypt. Figure 7 depicts how

the empire had expanded over the course of roughly 100 years since the ascension of Tiglath Pileser III. Esarhaddon brought some Egyptian territories under Assyrian dominion, but it would be his successor, Ashurbanipal, that would expand Assyrian control over Egyptian territory even further, which is represented in the map by light green.

Esarhaddon likely would have preferred to continue further west, but he was stopped and forced to turn his attention to threats elsewhere in the empire, specifically Babylonia, which was once again working to thwart Assyrian rule and gathering allies to support them in the process, leaving Egyptians once again free to retake lost territory and begin working east towards Palestine.

Esarhaddon's campaigns in the north and northeastern frontiers of the Assyrian Empire proved to be a foreshadowing of the problems his successors would be unable to solve, specifically the growing power of the Median kingdom (which existed east of Assur in present-day Iran.) The campaigns directed in this part of the empire were largely defensive, as the Medes began to assert their power and make inroads into Assyrian territory. While Esarhaddon's losses were modest and Assyria still maintained control over the vast region spanning from Anatolia in the west to the Caucus and Zagros mountains in the north and northwest, the stage was slowly being set for an invasion of Assyria that future kings would be unable to stop.

The rest of Esarhaddon's reign is defined largely by his dealings with Babylonia. An Elamite invasion into Babylonian territory upset a period of time defined by relative peace, although it was dealt with by the Assyrian armies relatively quickly. Furthermore, Esarhaddon was left to pick up the pieces from Sennacherib's decision to sack Babylon, meaning much of his time as king was spent rebuilding temples and other important buildings inside the city.

Some historians attribute this policy of appeasement to the pro-Babylonian party inside Assyria, whereas others credit Esarhaddon's character as a statesman; he knew full well he would need to secure his southern flank to be able to do anything else in the empire. But no matter the reason, the policy was relatively successful, as Esarhaddon was able to maintain peace with and within Babylonia. But once again, these successes would be short-lived.

Towards the end of his reign, Esarhaddon took great pains to plan for the succession of his son, Ashurbanipal. Part of the reason he was so preoccupied with this ceremony is that he had been greatly troubled by the way he had taken the throne, considering the death of his father to be a bad omen. Throughout his reign, Esarhaddon was uniquely obsessed with the divine, potentially a consequence of his ill-fated rise to power. He made use of a substitute king, which was an ancient ritual designed to help him avoid ill fate, and he was known to compulsively seek prognostic reports from every possible clergy and oracle before embarking on a campaign. There is reason to believe these decisions actually slowed down his progress—particularly the use of a substitute king, which would have limited his control over his own kingdom—but no matter the consequences of his piety, Esarhaddon's religious fervor was exceptionally strong even by ancient standards.

Despite all these efforts to ward off bad omens, Esarhaddon could not fend off death which came in 668, just three years after his conquest of Egypt and only 13 after he had taken the throne. He would turn an empire over to his son that was thriving in nearly every aspect. Its territory stretched from Egypt to Babylon and up into the Zagros Mountains, its armies were feared all throughout the region, and great building projects combined with advancements in writing and theology made Assyria the cultural capital of Mesopotamia and abroad.

But this was all about to disappear, partly because of the decisions Esarhaddon made about the succession of the throne, but largely because the tides of history were beginning to seek balance, leading to an erosion of Assyrian rule and the assertion of other powers, ultimately bringing an end to the Assyrian Empire.

### *Ashurbanipal and the Beginning of the End*

Much like his predecessors, when Ashurbanipal took the throne in 668 BCE, he inherited an empire at its peak of dominance. Every king before him had managed to secure previously conquered territory and expand into new lands, bringing glory and riches to the leaders and citizens of Assyria. Esarhaddon had finally brought parts of Egypt under Assyrian control, and Ashurbanipal would manage to expand upon it.

Victories on the Arabian Peninsula, Phoenicia, and Palestine throughout the reigns of Esarhaddon and Sennacherib had placed these territories firmly under Assyrian control, and they made kingdoms further north, towards

Anatolia, fearful, resulting in voluntary offers of friendship and tribute. Because these territories were so well fortified, Ashurbanipal could turn his attention to extending Assyrian control further into Egypt.

The campaigns led by Ashurbanipal certainly go down as some of the most impressive in Assyrian history. After several attempts, some of which were initially successful but then reversed due to rebellion, Ashurbanipal managed to enter and conquer the major Egyptian cities of Thebes and Memphis. These victories would have brought great glory to the Assyrian kings, as this meant Assyrian control now extended further than it ever had before.

However, the decision to enter this far into Egypt can certainly be criticized when examining it from a historical point of view. Assyria already controlled large tracts of land throughout Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Palestine, Syria, Arabia, and Egypt, putting considerable stress on its ability to manage and maintain its own territory. Further expansion only exacerbated these troubles, leaving Assyria weaker than one may have thought given their considerable military might as compared to their neighbors.

While invading Egypt in the first place was not a decision grounded in common sense, Ashurbanipal at least had the sense to stop after his conquest of Memphis and Thebes, turning his attention elsewhere in the empire, specifically Arabia, which had been the site for repeated rebellions since the area had fallen under Assyrian control. Using Damascus as a base, Ashurbanipal would run raids throughout the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, destroying nomadic tribes and intimidating rebellious vassals.

The rest of Ashurbanipal's reign was dominated by dealing with Assyria's increasingly hostile neighbors to the north, east, and south, specifically the kingdoms of Urartu, Medes, Elam, and Babylonia. As one might expect, Elam and Babylonia were allies throughout most of Assyria's imperial ascension, making it difficult for Assyria to maintain any meaningful control over its southern neighbor.

Elam, the kingdom occupying much of today's northern Iran, was never really a direct threat to Babylon, nor did Assyria ever make it that far east. But they had a reasonable desire to contain Assyria's power and they did so through the support of rebellious Babylonian kings. There were, however, brief periods throughout this final stage of the Neo-Assyrian Empire where Elam and Assyria maintained peaceful, if not cooperative, relations. Yet this would not last long, as Elam would ultimately be one of the powers to assist in the defeat of the Assyrians.

Despite Ashurbanipal's successes in conquering territory throughout Egypt and also fortifying Assyrian control throughout most of Arabia, he would also oversee the destabilization of the empire that resulted from his brother, Shamash-shum-ukin, who had been appointed to rule over Babylon as part of Esarhaddon's succession plan and who decided to organize and lead a rebellion against his brother in c. 652 BCE.

Civil war would engulf the Assyrian Empire for the next five years, giving way to a period in Assyrian history known as The Great Rebellion. Ashurbanipal would ultimately succeed in suppressing the rebellion started by his brother and placing a more loyal leader on the Babylonian throne, but this moment in history marked the beginning of the end for the Assyrian Empire.

Ashurbanipal would continue to rule over Assyria until his death in 627, but after the end of the civil war started by his brother's rebellion, he would do little in terms of expanding the empire, as hostilities from the Elamites and the Median kingdoms intensified. While he would not oversee any major losses during this time, his inability to effectively destroy his enemies demonstrated that Assyrian power was finally weakening, opening the door for its powerful neighbors to enter the scene and finally remove this powerful yet terrifying kingdom from its position of dominance.

# Chapter 5 – The Fall of the Empire

As is often the case in imperial history, the expansion of the Assyrian Empire actually coincides with its downfall. Starting with the rise of Tiglath Pileser III to the throne in 747 BCE, the Assyrian Empire began to expand dramatically, largely by conquering territories Assyrian kings had long sought to control but had failed to conquer, mainly Phoenicia, Palestine, Syria, Arabia, and Egypt.

Despite the successes of these campaigns, they ultimately distracted Assyria from the major threat to its dominance in Mesopotamia: the kingdom of Babylon. Since Babylon and Assyria shared many cultural similarities—mainly worshiping the same gods—and because both kingdoms were exceptionally powerful, there had been an understanding between the two kingdoms that neither was to try to meddle too much in the affairs of the other. Yet as Assyria began to rise in prominence throughout the 7th and 8th centuries BCE, the prospect of controlling their southern neighbor and ruling all of Mesopotamia became too great an opportunity to pass up, leading to a prolonged period of Assyrian intervention in Babylon that would contribute significantly to the fall of the empire.

The story told here starts with the rise of Tiglath Pileser III and details the relations each subsequent Assyrian king had with its southern neighbor, as trying to describe these events alongside an explanation of other Assyrian campaigns in the north and west would not do justice to the significance of Assyrian-Babylonian affairs. The periods in which Assyrian kings turned their attention away from Babylon align nicely with the expansions of territory that existed in other parts of the empire.

***Losing Control: Assyria Struggles to Maintain Power over Babylon***

As a powerful Mesopotamian civilization, Assyrian rule was under constant threat from the many different powers that also existed in Southwest Asia, specifically the kingdoms of Elam, Arabia, Egypt, Urartu, Medes, and Babylonia. From around 750-650 BC, Assyria became heavily involved in Babylonian affairs in an attempt to expand their influence in the region. This move would end up having significant consequences for all the civilizations in the Fertile Crescent and surrounding areas. It would lead to a period of restored dominance for Babylon, and it also was one of the most

important factors driving the decline of Assyrian power and influence in the area.

The year 748, or 747 depending on the source, initiates Assyrian involvement in the affairs of Babylon, and it serves as a useful starting point for understanding how these interactions affected the overall decline of Assyrian hegemony. It was in this year that Assyrian king Tiglath Pileser III ascended the throne. After decades of famine and military struggle against tribal groups such as the Chaldeans and Aramaeans (the two dominant tribes of ancient Mesopotamia), Tiglath Pileser III began his rule by moving quickly and forcefully into the lands bordering the southern and eastern edges of Assyrian territories. Part of the strategy for doing this was to prop up the Babylonian throne from afar. A strong Babylonian king was in Assyria's best interest, as it helped secure the region and provide a buffer between Assyria and other powerful states such as Elam and Medes. As a result, Assyrian kings would often exert control over Babylonian territories on behalf of the Babylonian kings. Yet unsurprisingly, this fragile alliance would often break, leading to conflict between Babylon and Assyria.

However, by 745, Tiglath Pileser III had his attention drawn elsewhere, and this caused him to leave the Babylonians to fend for themselves. A serious of political revolts in Babylon led to the ascension of a Chaldean, Mukin-zeri, to the Babylonian throne. After having just spent the last few years working to control Chaldean influence in Babylon, Tiglath Pileser III did not take this news well. He moved quickly into Babylon and worked to confine Mukin-zeri's influence, subjecting many other Chaldean cities to tribute, effectively removing Mukin-zeri's source of power. After doing this, Tiglath Pileser III assumed the throne of Babylon.

Direct Assyrian control of the Babylon kingdom became the norm for the next century, with most of Tiglath Pileser III's successors assuming similar positions of influence within Babylonian affairs. Tiglath Pileser III died in 727 and was succeeded by his son, Shalmaneser V, but this reign was short-lived (lasting only 5 years) and poorly documented. The only significant event recorded is a large-scale deportation of Chaldeans from territories surrounding Babylon. However, Assyrian kings were never able to bring the kingdoms of Babylonia fully under their control. Instead, Babylonian leaders, usually Chaldeans, were able to seize power when they sensed weakness in the Assyrian rule, or when other matters distracted Assyrian kings from paying enough attention to their southern flank.

As a result, over the next several decades, Assyrians and Chaldeans would struggle for control over the Babylonian throne, and this struggle would have a significant effect on the well-being of the day-to-day experiences of Babylonian citizen and on the ability of the Assyrian Empire to remain intact. Periods of stability and economic prosperity were punctuated with war and conflict that would all but bring Babylonian life to a halt.

For a while, attempts by Babylonian rulers to assert independence were supported by the kings of Elam—the civilization lying to the east of Babylon in modern-day Iraq. The Babylonian king Merodach-baladan (a Chaldean), who assumed the Babylonian throne in 721, was able to secure an alliance with Elam that would succeed in resisting the Assyrians. And the time of this collaboration aligned with the decision of Sargon II (who assumed the Assyrian throne after Shalmaneser V's death in 722) to turn his attention away from Babylon and Assyria's southern flank.

The combination of passive Assyrian intervention and an alliance with Elam allowed Merodach-baladan to reign relatively freely for the next ten years. An attempted attack on the ancient city of Der, which, although controlled by Assyria at the time, had historically been a part of the Babylonian kingdom. Assyria took up arms in defense of the city, but the battle ended in a stalemate, with the Elamites gaining some territory but with the Assyrians retaining control of the city itself. However, after this battle, the Assyrian army retreated to the north, leaving the region in peace for a full ten years.

Merodach-baladan used this peacetime to restore prosperity to Babylon. Scientific and cultural activity boomed, and there was an economic expansion that increased the number of transactions—meaning the recorded economic activities of the time, such as contracts signed, tributes paid, and so forth—to the highest number in five centuries. There were also significant advances in astronomy and writing.

However, this would change in 710 when Sargon II turned his attention back to the south and began retaking some of the territory the Babylonian kings had managed to secure in the previous decade. This culminated with Sargon II's defeat of Merodach-baladan in 709. At this time, Sargon II assumed control of the Babylonian throne and began working to consolidate his conquest. He did this by centralizing provincial and tribal governments, placing them under the control of two governors, and also through the widespread deportation of Aramaeans and Chaldeans. Furthermore, he

sought to transform tribal towns by injecting them with Assyrian populations and institutions.

This decision would mark a significant turning point in the Late Assyrian Empire. Throughout the next thirty years, Assyrian kings would engage in a serious of costly and drawn-out military campaigns intended to secure control over Babylonian territories. While these efforts were successful in that they turned Elamite allegiances away from Chaldean kings and towards the Assyrians, and that Assyrian kings were able to assert dominance over Babylonian territories, they ultimately contributed to the empire's downfall, especially after what is known as the Great Rebellion.

The origins of the Great Rebellion can be traced all the way back to Sargon II's death in battle in 705. He was replaced by his son, Sennacherib, who would oversee a period of short-lived stability. A rebellion began in 703 led by provincial governors and Merodach-baladan, who had been in hiding since his defeat to Sargon II seven years prior; he managed to rally support in tribal settlements and cities around Babylon for his return to the throne. After several years of conflict, in which allegiances and alliances shifted frequently, Merodach-baladan was eventually defeated for good in 700. Sennacherib then left Babylon, leaving behind his son, Ashur-nadin-shumi, as steward and monarch of Babylon, to rule over a period of relative stability.

However, that would end in 694 when Sennacherib decided to mount a campaign against a group of Elamites who had granted refuge to groups of rebellious Chaldeans. This decision set in motion yet another period of political instability. Defeat in northwestern Babylon left another Chaldean king, Mushezib-Marduk, on top of the Babylonian throne, but after the Elamite king suffered a stroke and support from the Arabs in the west dwindled, Mushezib-Marduk had no means of securing his own claim to power. Babylon eventually fell back into Assyrian control in the winter of 689.

After this revolt, Sennacherib was far less merciful than Assyrian kings of the past. He began to dismantle the city, razing buildings, and instructing his troops to destroy temples and loot as much as they could. He also made a point of removing the soil from around the Euphrates, sending it down the river into the Persian Gulf, so as to remove Babylonian farming capacity. During this period, economic activity throughout Babylon understandably

sank, thrusting the region into the worst period of economic despair it had experienced over the previous six decades.

This was significant, as there had long been an understanding that the Assyrians would give special treatment to the Babylonians. Sennacherib recanted on this, and it was something the Babylonians would never forgive. It is likely for this reason that the Babylonians became so involved in military campaigns led by the Egyptians and Medians, which would ultimately bring an end to the Assyrian period of Near Eastern history.

Things would again change dramatically in 681. Sennacherib was assassinated, and Esarhaddon took his place. He immediately performed an about-face regarding policy towards Babylon, restoring the city as the cultural and political center of the area. He also restored long-held tax exemptions to certain parts of the population and ushered in policies that would restore economic prosperity to the region.

It seems Babylonians and their allies responded favorably to this shift in policy, as Esarhaddon's reign experienced few major disruptions. There were of course minor tribal disturbances, but Esarhaddon was able to rule Babylon relatively peacefully throughout the duration of his time as Assyrian king. But towards the end of his time as ruler, when the moment arrived for him to name a successor, Esarhaddon's choice would have profound effects on the state of Babylonia and also on the stability of the Assyrian Empire.

Towards the end of his reign, Esarhaddon named his son, Ashurbanipal, as heir to the Assyrian throne, but he gave one of his younger sons, Shamash-shum-ukin, the kingdom of Babylonia, envisioning a scenario where his two sons ruled as independent but united sovereigns.

However, this would not come to be. It's unclear how specific Esarhaddon was in his mandate that power be divided, but in the end, Ashurbanipal came to not only rule Assyria and its empire, but he also maintained close control over Babylon, effectively turning Shamash-shum-ukin into a dependent monarch. It seems this decision was initially something to which Shamash-shum-ukin agreed, but repeated interference by Ashurbanipal into Babylonian governance soured the relationship and eventually drew the two brothers into direct conflict.

Fighting broke out sometime in 652 BCE, and it would last for the next seven years. There are considered to be two theaters, the North, led by

Ashurbanipal, and the South, led by his brother Shamash-shum-ukin. While many of the major cities such as Uruk, Kullab, Ur, Kissik, and Eridu declared their allegiance to Ashurbanipal, only Uruk was reinforced with Assyrian troops, making it the only city of this group to be seriously threatened throughout the war. Shamash-shum-ukin, however, was able to gain the support of the Elamites to the east and the Arabs from the west (a recurring theme in the Assyrian struggle to maintain control over Babylonia), and this helped prolong the war for much longer than would have been expected considering the relative dominance of Ashurbanipal.

Two major consequences came from the fraternal conflict known as The Great Rebellion. Firstly, Elam was essentially removed as an influential actor in the region. After suppressing the rebellion in Babylonia, Ashurbanipal moved through western Elam, devastating the plain as he did. People were relocated, cities were destroyed, animals (which had been Elam's primary source of wealth) were run off, and salt and thorn-bearing plants were sowed across fields, returning the land to a primeval state. Secondly, Assyria never again embarked upon a major military campaign. Suppressing and punishing rebellious populations through the Elamite plain, the Arabian Desert, and Babylonia put tremendous strain on Assyrian resources. And by removing Elam, Assyria effectively destroyed a buffer that had protected them from stronger tribal groups threatening to advance north from present-day Iran.

What's important to note about this period of Assyrian history is just how dependent the empire's political apparatus was on its leader, the emperor. No system of political power can rely too heavily on just one person, but as seen with the sweeping changes in policy that came as new rulers took the throne, this was certainly the case in late Assyrian times. This sheds some light on a crucial truth about the empire at this point in time: its grip on power was loosening.

Furthermore, part of the reason Assyria was able to establish itself as the dominant power in the region was because of its military superiority. However, this slowly crumbled over the 100-year span from the mid-8$^{th}$ to mid-7$^{th}$ century BCE. Repeated campaigns in the wake of rebellions in Babylon, as well as strengthening alliances among Assyria's neighbors, meant that Assyrian control over the Fertile Crescent was slowly dwindling. The inability of Assyrian rulers after Tiglath Pileser III to maintain a firm hold over Babylon and its surrounding territories represents a weakening of

this military hegemony. And although the Assyrian Empire would remain intact some 20 years after the end of the Great Rebellion, Assyria would not launch another significant military campaign, and their days as the most dominant power in Mesopotamia were essentially over.

***Kandalanu's Reign and the Siege of Harran***

After succeeding in suppressing Shamash-shum-ukin's rebellion, Ashurbanipal appointed Kandalanu to the Babylonian throne. Not much evidence exists about the origin of Kandalanu or his time as king, leading many to suggest that perhaps Kandalanu was merely a throne name for Ashurbanipal, meaning they were the same person. But there is no definitive evidence to prove this.

Whether or not this notion is to be believed, it is true that the 20 years in which Kandalanu ruled Babylon after the Great Rebellion were prosperous. He was likely given control of the kingdom gradually, with Ashurbanipal overseeing the running of Babylon from afar. The first five years were marked with slow economic activity, but the next fifteen saw the region return to the levels of prosperity it had enjoyed during the times of Esarhaddon.

Kandalanu and Ashurbanipal both died in 627 (another reason why some believe they may have been the same person), and this created another period of instability. Nabopolassar assumed the Babylonian throne, but he was quickly beaten back by Assyrian forces. However, after Ashurbanipal's death, Assyria had been left with two leaders: Sin-shumu-lishir and Sin-sharra-ishkun. This suggests that the power structure in Assyria had been significantly weakened. In fact, in Babylonian texts, 626 BCE is considered the first year where Assyrian lands had no kings.

Nevertheless, an Assyrian army made its way down to Babylon to lay siege and restore order. But unlike previous sieges, which left Babylon in ruins, the Babylonian army was able to rally and plunder the Assyrian army. This gave legitimacy to Nabopolassar's claim to the throne, and it also marked the beginning of a new era in Babylon that saw it as the center of influence in the Fertile Crescent.

Shortly after Nabopolassar expelled the Assyrians from Babylon, Cyaxares, the king of Medes, a region located to the northeast of Assyria, launched an attack on Assyrian territories. Median forces captured Tarbisu and then decisively defeated the Assyrians at the Battle of Assur. They then joined

forces with the Babylonian army and launched an attack on the center of Assyrian political and economic control, Nineveh.

It was during this battle, in 612 BCE, where the Assyrian king Sin-sharra-ishkun died and was replaced by Ashur-uballit II. Ashur-uballit II then collected his forces and went to Harran, which is located to the west of Nineveh. However, the Medians and Babylonians besieged Harran in a battle known as the Siege of Harran, which ended with the fall of Harran in 609. An attempt was made by a force made up of Egyptians and Assyrians to take Harran back, but it failed, and this all but ended the Assyrian Empire as we know it.

***Understanding the Assyrian Collapse***

To observers of history, it may be difficult to understand how the Assyrian Empire, which grew so substantially in size throughout the 7th and 8th centuries was able to be toppled in such a short period of time. It went from controlling the entire region of Mesopotamia, with strongholds to the north, south, and west, to essentially a vassal of the Babylonian Empire in less than half a century. And with this rise of the Babylonians, Assyria all but disappeared from the annals of history.

This might seem strange to student of ancient history, but the story of the Assyrian collapse is a familiar one. The kingdom of Assyria, the region surrounding Assur, Nineveh, Calah, and environs, is actually quite small and generally resource-poor. Yet through their use of superior weaponry, effective military tactics such as siege warfare, and strategic deportation policies, Assyria was able to significantly expand its influence throughout the region. And, the main purpose of Assyria's quest for power was so that it could secure access to the resources it needed to support its population.

This set up a paradoxical situation in which Assyria needed to expand in order to survive, but it was this expansion that ultimately contributed to its demise. The resources acquired through the tribute collected from conquered territories were necessary for the survival of the Assyrian kingdom, but maintaining this system of tribute and control also put a tremendous strain on these resources, particularly manpower.

It is for this reason why Assyrian power in the region can be documented through such tremendous ebbs and flows. Starting with the Old Assyrian Empire, which came into existence towards c. 2000 BCE, Assyrian kings were constantly conquering territory and then reconquering the territory

taken by previous kings they lost. This occurred because Assyrian kings were never able to leave behind forces sufficient enough to quell rebellions or establish firm control over newly conquered regions under threat from nearby powers.

As a result, the Assyrian Empire became overly dependent on its emperor. Rebellions would break out in one region of the empire, and because the local forces were not sufficient to stop these insurrections, territory would be lost until the emperor and his army could make their way back to reassert Assyrian rule. Doing this meant once again leaving newly conquered territory undefended, which meant it would only be a matter of time before these conquered populations would rebel or be conquered by someone else.

This trend existed throughout Assyrian history. And the only reason the Neo-Assyrian Empire was able to expand to the point that it did was because this period saw the strongest Assyrian military. It struck fear into the hearts of kings across Mesopotamia, into Anatolia, and throughout Armenia and other northern territories. As a result, many of these kings, desiring to avoid trouble for their people, would voluntarily submit to Assyrian rule, giving the Assyrian kings a base from which they could expand the empire even further.

However, as Assyria picked fights with larger and more powerful kingdoms, such as Egypt, Elam, and Babylon, it became more difficult for them to secure all of the empire's borders. Babylon's ascendancy under Nabopolassar presented an opportunity for the Egyptians and Medians to retake lands previously lost to the Assyrians and eventually move on the cities at the center of Assyrian power.

It's easy to look back on the fall of Assyria and wonder why they did not decide to simply stop expanding and instead consolidate their power at home. But those of us studying history are armed both with hindsight and modern ways of thinking. To the leaders of antiquity, conquest was everything. Securing new lands brought riches and glory to the monarch and his subjects, and it was a means of pleasing the gods, who were ultimately the determiners of destiny.

The story of the Assyrian Empire is a long one, spanning thousands of years and countless kings, some of whom, such as Tiglath Pileser III and Sargon II, have gone down in history next to Alexander the Great, Julius Cesar, and

Genghis Khan as some of the greatest conquerors of all time. Yet just as these powerful rulers would eventually fall, so would the Assyrians, but not before making their mark as one of the most successful civilizations in the history of the ancient world.

# Chapter 6 – Assyrian Government

While the Assyrian Empire expanded largely as a result of military conquest, for it to actually be considered an empire it had to exert some degree of political control over the territories and peoples over which it claimed dominion. The structure of power in Assyria changed dramatically as the empire moved from the Middle Assyrian Empire towards its pinnacle during the Neo-Assyrian Empire, mainly through the addition of diplomatic treaties that helped give Assyrian kings control over certain territories, or that at least gave them considerable influence.

In general, though, it's useful to understand the government in the Assyrian kingdom as being divided into two parts: Assyria proper and Greater Assyria. Neither of these names were used in ancient times, although the territories far away from the imperial center were often referred to as "The Land." For the purposes of historical study, though, Assyria proper can be considered to be the core of the empire, and it consisted of the lands surrounding the great metropolises of Assur, Nineveh, and Calah, as well as the territories in parts of middle Mesopotamia and eastern Syria.

These lands were governed through a system of regional administrators who were all directly subservient to the king. It's helpful to think of the Assyrian bureaucratic system as a pyramid, with the king at the top, his chief advisers directly below him, and then a wide range of other regional governors below them. However, this pyramid structure should not be taken rigidly, as it did not often work in exactly this manner. The king would often give orders to governors who were several levels removed from the top, and positions were granted more out of need than in accordance with any sort of state planning strategy, i.e., as territories came into the control of the Assyrian king, he would grant authority to a regional ruler as he saw fit.

One thing to note is that few, if any, Assyrian officials were literate. The state apparatus was maintained largely through an army of scribes who would write out orders from the king and then send them to all reaches of the empire. It's safe to say that without this network of scribes it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the king to maintain any degree of control over his empire, which helps to explain why scribes were given such high status throughout Assyrian society.

Overall, control of the bureaucracy in Assyria proper was tighter than it was in Greater Assyria, but this did not mean that governors and administrators always obeyed orders. Heavily influenced by the people they were governing, they were frequently the source of rebellions or other insurrections, which Assyrian kings spent much time dealing with, usually by sending armies or bringing their own army, to forcefully restore order and Assyrian rule. Since Assyrian kings were also military leaders, they would lead their own army which was usually considered to be the most powerful of all the Assyrian armies. In fact, as seen in the story of Assyrian imperial expansion, the king and his army were largely responsible for the military successes of the empire. Other leaders were either less apt, or they were given smaller forces to command, making them less effective. As such, being a member of the king's army was considered to be a great honor for Assyrian soldiers.

The law in Assyria was entirely dependent on the king. Matters such as contract disputes or decisions about crimes were left up to local administrators who would act in the name of the king. In instances where a settlement could not be reached, those involved in the dispute might have had to travel to a nearby provincial capital to seek the judgment of a more highly-ranking official.

Most of the conflicts that arose would deal with debts that were left unpaid, which were often settled by the debtor being sold into slavery at the service of the one who had granted the debt. This individual would be expected to serve for a time determined by the court to be sufficient for paying off the debt.

However, as can be discerned from the imperial history of the Assyrian Empire, the main source of governance was force and terror. Governors left in control of a city or region were expected to remain loyal to the king, and the punishment for disloyalty was death. Those who supported a rebellious official would either be deported, executed, or sold into slavery.

Treatment of disloyal governors was also rather harsh. These people would often be skinned and flayed, or decapitated, and put on display for all those in the area to see to discourage further rebellion. The logic behind this kind of behavior was of course to say, "remain loyal to the king and everything will be okay." And given that most people were illiterate and completely dependent on kings and other nobility for the right to work land and earn a living, this was not an overwhelmingly difficult statute to impose on people.

Further afield, in the territories known as Greater Assyria, the Assyrian kings relied on treaties to enforce their rule, making use of the local and regional powers to help them exert their influence. In general, there were two different types of treaties: treaties of cooperation and treaties of vassalage.

Treaties of cooperation were usually formed with kingdoms too powerful to be conquered. These might include the installation of an Assyrian king in exchange for Assyrian military support, or it might leave the local king in power and instead establish a peaceful trade agreement. Oftentimes the arrangement would involve the formation of an alliance against another nearby power.

For example, towards the end of the Assyrian Empire, around 650 BCE, Assyrians were able to recruit support from the Arabs and Palestinians to launch an invasion of Egypt. But these alliances would soon crumble, with the Egyptians recruiting the same cities to join them and Babylon in overrunning the Assyrians for good. These kingdoms wedged between these two great powers were easily swayed to support the one which was more powerful, as this presented them with a good opportunity to regain their own independence.

Other good examples of these types of agreements were the ones made with the kings of Babylon, who were traditionally granted significant liberties to govern as they pleased, partially because the Assyrian kings knew they would never be able to fully overpower the Babylonian kings. This was an assumption that turned out to be true, as the breaking of these treaties and the attempted conquest of Babylon was one of the main reasons why the Assyrian Empire fell.

The other treaties used to control Greater Assyria were treaties of vassalage. These were usually used with kingdoms Assyria could easily intimidate, and they usually revolved around the payment of tribute. These treaties were often pursued with the weaker kingdoms of Phoenicia, Anatolia, and the territories north of Assur, and they proved to be rather effective in enriching the empire and expanding its influence.

Overall, the Assyrian system of government was as effective as one would expect an imperial government in the ancient times to be. A loose yet effective network of regional administrators helped govern the territories closest to the center of the empire while treaties of cooperation and

vassalage helped to subdue the territories further afield. Yet underlying both systems was the threat of constant war and the terror that made the Assyrian armies and kings famous both in antiquity and in modern times.

# Chapter 7 – The Assyrian Military

Much has been said of the terrific military might of the Assyrian Empire, and for good reason. The Assyrian Empire made great strides in terms of organizing their military and using it effectively, so much so that the two great empires which followed Assyria, Babylon and Persia, had militaries that were basically modeled upon that of the Assyrians.

It's believed that by the time Sargon II came into power, the total size of the Assyrian military available to the kings of Assur was a force of approximately several hundred thousand troops. However, all of these troops were rarely, if ever, called into action at the same time. In fact, the regular standing army would have been rather small, and its size would have grown depending on the needs of a campaign. Because of this, it can be said that by the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, there were three distinct classes within the military: professional soldiers, men fulfilling their *ilku* (meaning "duty"), and special soldiers called up for specific campaigns.

Before going into the differences between the three groups, it's important to understand the structure of the entire military. At its head was, of course, the king. He was responsible for all campaigns, and in theory actually conducted them himself, with some exceptions. In the early days of Assyrian power, dating back to the Middle Assyrian Empire, campaigns were not much more than loosely organized raids of cities and towns. However, by the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, attacks were coordinated, well-planned, and an integral part of an overall policy of expansion.

Directly below the king was the field marshal, who can be thought of more as a grand general. He would have been responsible for working with regional governors to levy troops. The provincial governors were responsible for the military in their province, and they would delegate to captains, who were in charge of territories as small as just a few villages. As should be expected, military rank and political power were directly connected.

Professional soldiers were recruited from the population after having been identified by a leader as being exceptional. These individuals would lead their lives as full-time soldiers, usually stationed in far-away military camps. The military camps were typically the remnants of conquered cities

that had been repurposed so as to keep Assyria's best soldiers closer to the theaters of war. Those chosen to be professional soldiers would be sent off to these camps for training, and although their position was high in society, for being one of the king's professional soldiers was a great honor, their lifestyle was hard. It was defined by constant warfare, and they would rarely return home, even in years without a campaign.

Generally, the size of the regular Assyrian army was relatively small. To swell its ranks in support of a campaign, the Assyrian kings would assert *ilku*. In exchange for the protection offered by the king, all landowners would be expected to give military service when called upon. If the king needed troops, he would work with his generals to find them, i.e. the field marshal would tell provincial governors how many troops were expected of him, and his captains would then find the men best fit to serve. When chosen to serve in a campaign, men would be sent to the capital where a great ceremony would take place. Campaigns usually began in the spring, after the winter and the rains had passed, and were kicked off with an inspection of the troops. Priests and other diviners would accompany them, giving blessings and providing prognostications as they went. When returning victorious from a campaign, the king would parade around in his ceremonial chariot. In cases where tribute attempts had failed, or where rebellion had broken out, conquered kings and princes would be forced to walk behind the chariot in chains.

Troops that had been recruited from Assyria itself would be given higher positions, usually in the cavalry or chariotry, largely because they were believed to be more loyal. Others, such as those recruited from conquered territories, or from lands where loyalty was suspect, were subjugated to the infantry. The most common weapons of the infantry were battle axes, spears, bows, swords, daggers, maces, and slings. Chariot and cavalry riders were usually equipped with a spear or a bow, and cavalrymen would ride accompanied by someone who would hold their shield while they fired arrows. Armor was distributed according to status, with higher ranking Assyrians receiving scale armor and the lower ranking ones getting leather.

In terms of tactics, the Assyrians relied on three major ones, and they would come to be what made their army so prolific: pitched battles, siege warfare, and psychological warfare. The Assyrians did not use guerrilla tactics, choosing instead to engage their enemy in open battlefields. However, they were known for using several clever yet new tactics for the time, such as

damming rivers to flood the enemy camp, attacking at midnight, and positioning themselves between the enemy and their water supply.

However, the defining characteristic of the Assyrian military was siege warfare. They were far from its inventors, but they were able to essentially perfect it given the technological capabilities of the time. The brains behind Assyrian sieges were the engineers who would travel with the army. They designed and built what were essentially ancient tanks—battering devices on wheels—that had space where archers could hide and shoot at defending bowmen. They would use ladders to climb city walls, but they would also build earthen ramps which these "tanks" could climb and use to bombard the city from above. Furthermore, they would light fires and dig holes around the city walls to try and find ways to get in.

When this didn't work, the Assyrian army would set to work destroying the territory surrounding a city. They would block any and all roads going into the city, and they would also destroy farmland and any other villages found outside the city walls. However, this type of warfare was costly and time-consuming, so Assyrians frequently sought more expedient ways of conquering a city, one of which would be to terrorize its people.

After their first round of destruction, the leader, sometimes the king but perhaps a captain speaking on the king's behalf, would stand in front of the city and make arguments to the people as to why they should disobey their leaders and open the city walls. If this didn't work, then the Assyrians would find nearby villages and towns, ransack them, and then return with the dead bodies. These were horribly mutilated and usually flayed, and would subsequently be put on display for all to see.

The purpose of this was to show the subjects of the city what would eventually happen if they continued to resist. This would often prove effective in dealing with the city at hand, but it also made it much easier for the Assyrians to conquer other territories. Stories of their brutality would spread, and this would cause many places to simply open their gates before the Assyrian army would feel the need to engage in this cruelty. This policy of terror practiced by the Assyrian military was a big reason why they were able to consistently conquer so much land over such a long period of time.

These tactics, which proved to be so effective over time, would change the direction of ancient military traditions. The types of siege and psychological warfare conducted by the Assyrians would be seen again in Babylon,

Persia, and even Rome. By modern standards, they were brutal to say the least. But even to the Assyrians' contemporaries, the tactics would have seemed cruel, which gives us an idea of just how shocking these methods were. Yet they were highly successful, and they helped Assyria build an army that would be the main driver of Neo-Assyrian imperial expansion.

# Chapter 8 – Life in the Assyrian Empire

While Assyrian history is largely understood through the military and imperial conquests of its many kings, not everyone who lived under the Assyrians was concerned with imperial conquest. In fact, it's likely that only a small percentage of the people who would be considered Assyrians were in fact soldiers of what would become some of the greatest armies in the history of the ancient world.

### *The Assyrian Lower Classes*

Unsurprisingly, in the part of the world known as the "cradle of civilization," a location credited as one of the first places where people practiced sedentary lifestyles based on agriculture, the vast majority of Assyrians, and those who would fall under Assyrian rule, were farmers.

Generally speaking, as was the case throughout most of the ancient world, the people of Mesopotamia and beyond practiced a form of feudalism. Landlords would grant people the opportunity to work their land, which they could use for their own sustenance, and in exchange, the tenants were required to produce a certain bounty for the landlord. In some cases, there is evidence of land being split between landlords and tenants, with each party receiving half of whatever production came from the land.

Part of the reason war and conquest was so important in these times was to help people maintain control of their land. Taxes were paid to local governors, and in exchange, these governors, who were under varying degrees of control to other lords, would offer protection to the farmers. If raiding tribes made their way onto a farmer's land, the farmer would then turn to his lord to help him. The many insurrections that occurred during this period were usually in response to leaders' inability to defend people from the constant threats posed by people migrating throughout the land.

As discussed earlier, one of the downfalls of the Assyrian Empire was its inability to properly secure conquered territories. Consider the situation of an ancient Mesopotamian farmer: an Assyrian king marches through your territory demanding you declare fealty to him in the form of taxes and tribute or suffer the consequences. You, as a helpless farmer, have no choice but to submit. However, within a year, the Assyrian army has gone, and there are people making their way onto your territory. You appeal to your Assyrian vassals, but they are far away engaging in wars of conquests in

territories of which you know nothing. If another powerful king were to come and offer you protection in exchange for loyalty, what would you do? Most likely you would abandon the Assyrians in favor of this new king—that is until he left, and you were once again faced with the danger of invading tribes.

One can imagine that the life of a typical citizen in the Assyrian Empire was relatively unaffected by which individual was ruling.. Their only real concern was protection, meaning that they could easily be swayed to give their support to any king that was willing and able to offer this security. However, this would change as one kingdom grew more powerful. For example, by the end of the Bronze Age Collapse (c.1000 BCE), the Assyrians were the most powerful kingdom in the region, and as their army grew in size and strength, the risks of joining a rebellion in favor of another power grew, for the Assyrians did not take insurrections lightly. There was always the possibility that the army would return to reclaim its lost territory, punishing anyone who had dared defy their rule by offering support to another king.

This retaliation would likely not be immediate, as the Assyrian army rarely left large forces behind to defend conquered territory, choosing instead to take the bulk of their force onward in pursuit of further conquest. But nearly all Assyrian kings would begin their rule by working to reconquer lost territory and consolidate it into the empire, meaning a day of reckoning would nearly always come. But in the face of growing threats from nearby nomadic tribes, or other instabilities, loyalty to far off kings, whether Assyrian or someone else, was not entirely justified. In this sense, we can understand the lives of everyday Assyrian citizens to be ones of tremendous instability defined by fear and service.

Nevertheless, life went on. The main occupations besides farmers were what one might expect from ancient civilization. Most people were either animal herders, bakers, brewers, butchers, fishermen, brick makers, construction workers, potters, jewelers, prostitutes, etc. There was no system of money in ancient Assyria, so business was conducted largely through a barter system, with anything from flour to gold serving as currency.

These lower-class people would have been relegated to a mostly subsistence lifestyle. However, there was opportunity for people to climb the social ladder, mostly by conducting a savvy business. One famous example comes

from the city of Kish, which came to be ruled by a queen named Ku-Baba, who was at one time a tavern keeper. Stories like these, though, are rare, and while possible, social mobility was not really the norm.

Generally speaking, women were allowed and expected to perform similar duties as men, but they were most certainly considered secondary citizens. Women could not conduct business without the consent of their husbands, and they were expected to submit to their husband's will. For example, women were the first to assume occupations such as brewers, tavern keepers, doctors, and dentists, but once these positions became lucrative, they were taken over by men.

One interesting thing to note as it relates to women in society is the way marriage was organized. Polygamy was generally speaking not practiced by commoners. In fact, some of the most significant sources about the life of a commoner in the Assyrian Empire are marriage contracts. A woman's family would be expected to pay a dowry upon getting married, but if the man was found guilty of adultery, this dowry would be returned to her in full.

This is a rule that dates back to the code of Hammurabi and seems to have been widely practiced throughout much of the Assyrian Empire. However, one should be a bit wary about extrapolating cultural norms such as these across the entirety of the empire. Power shifted hands frequently, and it's difficult to know exactly which customs were truly practiced by large portions of the population.

As we could expect, the primary concern of the average Assyrian citizen was food. Luckily for them, they lived in the Fertile Crescent, a part of the world known for its rich soil and favorable climate. It was not without its challenges, and still susceptible to shocks, as seen from the Bronze Age Collapse, but generally speaking the citizens of ancient Mesopotamia were able to enjoy a healthy and varied diet even by modern standards.

The staple of the Mesopotamian diet was barley, the most widely-available grain in the region. The primary product people made was bread, but they put their barley to work in other ways. For example, because of this abundance of barley, it's believed that beer was invented in Mesopotamia, and taverns were regular institutions in most cities and villages.

In addition to barley, a wide variety of fruits and vegetables were readily available, such as apples, figs, cherries, apricots, pears, carrots, cucumbers,

beans, peas, and turnips.

Meat was also a regular part of the Mesopotamian diet; however, most people only ate the fish they could catch from the rivers or the small livestock they could keep in their pens, such as pigs, goats, and sheep. Beef would not have been consumed regularly if at all, largely because cows would have been too costly to raise and maintain and also because some cultural norms held cows in high esteem and prohibited their slaughter.

In general, the lives of commoners in ancient Assyria were hard and fraught with instability. The members of the lower class would be able to afford few luxuries, and it was usually a significant challenge to meet the production demands and taxes imposed by landowners and monarchs. Most people were illiterate, with writing a skill reserved for scribes and other members of the upper classes.

However, the common folk were not the lowest members of the social order. Slavery was prominent in ancient Mesopotamia as has been the case in civilizations around the world since earliest times. One could become a slave in a variety of different ways. The most common reason someone became a slave is they had been captured during war. As mentioned earlier, part of the power of the Assyrian kings came from their deportation policies, and a big component of these mass expulsions of people were to provide cities with the slave labor needed for the massive construction projects usually being conducted in the large metropolises of Assur, Nineveh, or Calah.

One could also choose to enter slavery as a means of repaying a debt, or one's family could sell you as a way of paying off their debt. When this happened, it usually resulted in the person having to move far away from their home. Furthermore, one could be sold into slavery as punishment for a crime. One of the consequences of slavery in ancient Mesopotamia, and in nearly all other parts of the world where its practice was widespread, was that it kept wages low for free laborers. Because war and deportation were near constants, there was a near unlimited supply of slave labor, meaning there was little to no incentive for people to offer higher wages to their laborers.

In general, slavery was not as harsh or brutal as later versions of it would be, such as the slavery imposed by the Spanish on the indigenous populations of Central and South America or the slavery of the British

Empire and American South, but a slave was still considered to be the lowest member of society. However, over time, through diligent work, a slave could earn his or her way to freedom, something that was especially common for those who agreed to enter slavery as a means of paying a debt; when the debt was paid, the slave was set free.

Both slaves and commoners lived difficult lives that were at the whims of those who yielded more power and influence in society, and they were deprived of nearly all the luxuries that were commonly enjoyed by people in the upper echelons of Mesopotamian society.

***The Upper Classes of Ancient Assyria***

The highest member of Assyrian society was obviously the king. One must always remember that what is now thought of as the Assyrian Empire was much different than the types of states we have today. While the kings that ruled from Assur, Nineveh, and Calah controlled large swaths of territory, and they attempted to maintain control by establishing governors or signing treaties, their grip on power was always loose. For evidence of this, one need only look at the drama of Assyrian imperial expansion, which was defined by repeated military conquests designed to reconquer rebellious territories and potentially expand Assyrian influence into new lands. As such, what we consider to be an empire, although powerful for its time, was really more a combination of conquered cities and city-states that were brought together under a common tribute system. This tribute system was large, complex, and imperfect. Nearly every city had its own king, and this king would give his loyalty to another king, who would do the same in return. In this way, some kings, by using their military and terror, were able to amass large spheres of influence that would ebb and flow depending on their effectiveness as a leader. The Assyrian kings became masters of this, putting themselves essentially at the top of the monarchical food chain in the region. They reported only to the gods, whereas all the other kings in the region reported to the Assyrians, at least when the Assyrian army was able to force them to do so.

So, while the privileges afforded to a king would vary differently based on his position within this tribute system, there were similarities in how kings lived. The first characteristic of a king is that he was considered to have a close relationship with the gods. In fact, the more powerful the king, the godlier he was considered to be. Enlarging his kingdom and providing for his people was proof that the gods favored him and the people he ruled.

Success in the battlefield was attributed to a king's relationship with the gods, meaning the legitimacy of a king's rule depended heavily on the amount of territory he was able to secure. As one would imagine, this gave heavy incentive to each king to wage war on the territories surrounding his kingdom, which is why the vast majority of ancient Assyrian history, and of all the Mesopotamian kingdoms for that matter, is defined largely by war.

One of the principle duties of a king, beyond providing protection for his subjects, was to build temples and other city improvements that would bring pride and glory to the people. Again, a common theme for nearly all Mesopotamian rulers, not just the Assyrians, was building. Because there was no money, the wealth needed to build these projects was acquired by conquering lands and acquiring the resources that existed on it. So, to further prove the depth of the relationship between a king and a god, it was important for them to embark on great building projects alongside their nearly endless military campaigns. It is for this reason that some of the world's most magnificent archaeological sites can be found throughout the Middle East. Archaeological discoveries in the 19th and 20th centuries uncovered these ancient treasures, but many have been lost due to the near constant conflict in the region today. .

The most common construction project undertaken by a king would, naturally, be a palace. The goal was always to build the largest and most luxurious palace possible, using as much as possible from their time spent conquering to showcase their wealth. Gold, silver, and other precious metals were obviously highly sought. However, perhaps somewhat ironically, most Assyrian kings would not be around to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Leaders of the Assyrian throne were expected to accompany their armies on military campaigns. They would infrequently return to their capital, which alternated between Assur, Nineveh, and Calah depending on the king, usually leaving the crown prince to oversee construction projects and the management of domestic affairs. Other less important kings would likely spend more time at home, but this would have been a sign of their weakness, giving the kings above them more power and prestige.

The pyramid of Assyrian society can be described in the following manner. The kings of Assur (or Nineveh or Calah, depending on which city the king chose to use as his stronghold) stood at the top. Just below them would have been kings of other cities who had been conquered and brought under the control of the Assyrian kings. Locally, they were still considered supremely

important, but since they were vassals to the Assyrian kings, there were limits to their power. We can think of these individuals as similar to the nobility in feudal Europe. They possessed significant power, but they were not at the top of the pecking order.

Under the many different levels of kings came the priests, which is understandable considering the importance of the gods to the Assyrian people. The main job of the clergy class was interpreting signs and omens. Before kings headed off to war, they were expected to first ask the priests if it was a good time to go to war. The priests would then analyze the different omens, ranging from the weather to the stars in the sky, and decide whether or not to give their blessing. Obviously, there was some bias, as the kings who were most successful were considered to be in good favor with the gods, and this meant they were more likely to receive a blessing for war.

Outside of this, the main tasks of priests included taking care of the temple and its business. They would also officiate ceremonies, including sacrificial rites. Furthermore, the priests of ancient Mesopotamia were the region's first healers, serving as doctors and dentists before these became professions on their own.

Below the priest class were the merchants and businessmen. Trade was an integral part of nearly all the ancient civilizations of the Near East. Their close proximity to one another made it easy for different cultures to engage in economic arrangements beneficial to both sides. One of the original sources of Assyrian power were the trade routes they established with cities in Anatolia (modern-day Eastern Turkey), and one of the main reasons why Assyria began to assert itself in this region was to protect these very same trade routes that were so important to their well-being and success.

Within the merchant class there were usually two groups: those who owned their own business and those who did not. For those who did not own their own business, life was relatively difficult. Most of their time was spent traveling from one city to the next exchanging goods. Trips home would be brief and would not result in much leisure. However, merchants who were successful enough to start their own business lived lives of leisure and luxury. They were able to send their employees out to do the hard work of traveling and trade, meaning they could stay and tend to their homes or attempt to get involved in local politics. Merchants who gained considerable wealth and influence in a region would sometimes make a play at rebellion, although this did not always work out, since naming oneself

king came after having established a close relationship to the gods, meaning other kings.

Other members of the upper class included the scribes and private tutors. Literacy was considered a privilege that was only extended to the wealthiest, most influential members of society. Women were typically not allowed to learn to read or write. And because there were no public schools, acquiring an education was reserved for only the most privileged individuals. Most educated people would become teachers, and their services were typically in high demand. For families with considerable wealth, it was common to hire a private tutor who would teach the children about math, science, and writing. Private tutors might have many different students, and some of them would become full-time employees for one family, which usually resulted in them living lives almost as luxurious as the families they worked for.

Because writing was not widespread, the daily lives of ancient Assyrians can only be pieced together through the various artifacts found at archaeological sites and some remaining contracts that were written on stones. However, this is still enough to gain a solid understanding of what life may have been like during the time of the Assyrians, and it's not overwhelmingly different from what one might expect. Distinct social classes meant the Assyrian society was sharply divided. Most of the power and luxury went to those in the upper classes, such as kings, priests, and entrepreneurial merchants, while the lower classes were left to do the bidding of their landlords and the kings who ruled them.

However, it's worth mentioning that "Assyrian society" was far from static. Assyrians first came onto the scene in Mesopotamia in the 2nd millennium BCE, and they existed to about the 7th century BCE until their imperial structure toppled and they were assimilated into other cultures of the time. During this span, the Assyrians made a number of advancements in key areas such as the arts, mathematics, science, and literature, and these are achievements that cannot be overlooked. While most will remember Assyria for their great armies and tremendous military expansion, their contributions to human civilization extend far beyond war and conquest.

# Chapter 9 – Assyrian Culture: Art, Math, and Science

The military traditions of the Assyrians are well-documented, but to only discuss this aspect of their society would do a great injustice to one of the most influential empires to have existed in the ancient world. While some of the advancements seen in the Assyrian age might not be seen as significant compared to what would come later, one cannot overlook their contributions to world culture. Unique art combined with advances in writing, math, and science helped advance civilization to points it had never before reached. However, nearly all of these advancements were done with heavy religious influence, a topic that must be discussed when looking at the cultural influences of the Assyrian Empire.

### *Assyrian Art*

It is safe to say the Assyrians are not known for their art, especially when compared to some of the other civilizations in the region, most notably the Egyptians. However, this does not mean Assyrian society lacked artistic influence. For one, it's believed the Assyrians were highly musical. Musical instruments, mainly drums, flutes, and other wind instruments, have been uncovered in many different archaeological sites, and it's believed they were used as both a source of recreation and religious ceremonies.

The Assyrians were apparently not too concerned with the creation of sculptures, something that was far more prevalent in other ancient civilizations, such as the Sumerians and the Egyptians. One of the few sculptures worth noting, the sculpture of Ashurbanipal, which can be found in the British Museum, is generally considered to be of low-quality, representing an underdeveloped tradition of sculpture in Assyria. Furthermore, the use of sculptures as adornments of palaces and other buildings was rare in Assyria. Only palaces and temples in Anatolia bear these characteristics and it's believed this was the work of the Hittites.

However, where the Assyrians did excel was in reliefs. Excavations of various sites, including Nineveh and Assur, uncovered countless reliefs which are considered to not only be beautiful works of art, but which also suggest the Assyrians had discovered a new use for art—propaganda.

The reasons historians believe this is because the Assyrians are one of the first Mesopotamian civilizations to paint reliefs not of the gods but rather of the kings. Most paintings tell stories of the many great military battles achieved by Assyrian kings, and it's believed these were used as a means of strengthening the perceived relationship between the kings and the gods, which would have served as a means of establishing legitimacy.

This is not to suggest that the Assyrians invented propaganda, but there was a strong tradition in Assyrian society of glorifying the conquests and accomplishments of the kings, and it seems this made its way into the arts, representing a shift in focus as compared to other civilizations that existed at the same time. Figures 7 and 8 are examples of some of the more elaborate reliefs created by Assyrian artists:

In addition to reliefs, Assyrians seemed to have been exceptional metal workers. They left behind stunning pieces of bronze, gold, and silver plates, vessels, and ornaments. This should not come as a surprise, considering that exceptional Assyrian metalwork, particularly iron, was one of the reasons the Assyrians were able to emerge as victors from the Bronze Age collapse. Additionally, it is believed female slaves, under royal commission, wove carpets and robes and embroidered them with silks and other fine fabrics acquired through trade with distant lands.

While the Assyrians produced few, if any, pieces of art that would achieve international fame, they did appear to have an exceptional art culture that was interested in glorifying the territorial achievements of Assyrian leaders. And as the empire expanded in both influence and size, the number and complexity of the artwork also expanded, suggesting Assyria, during its time of imperial dominance, was in fact a hub of sophisticated cultural development.

***Writing in Ancient Assyria***

For a civilization so overwhelmingly obsessed with war, it's surprising just how much attention was paid to the creation and preservation of written texts. Throughout the great cities of Assyria, mainly Nineveh, Assur, and Calah, massive royal libraries were found, but there is evidence to suggest that libraries existed all over the empire, mainly in temples. But it's also believed that many private citizens—mainly the wealthy ones—also had their own libraries.

There were three main types of texts that were contained in the great libraries of Assyria: royal inscriptions, myths and literature, and scientific texts. There seems to have been a great interest in preserving the literary traditions of Babylon, Akkadia, and Sumer, for Assyrian king after Assyrian king would order the transcription of countless Babylonian texts.

Royal inscriptions remain to this day the most significant source for understanding the events that took place within the Assyrian Empire. It was common for Assyrian kings to have a whole army of scribes at their disposal, some of whom were responsible for copying over older texts and some of whom would be given the duty of writing down the decisions, actions, and victories of Assyrian kings. Always searching for glory, many of these royal inscriptions contain exaggerated accounts of triumphs, leaving scholars of ancient Assyria with the tall task of attempting to verify these accounts.

The Assyrians wrote in what is known as cuneiform script, a style of writing that was significant in that it abandoned the use of pictographs and instead used symbols that followed a one symbol, one sound, one meaning formula. This style of writing was likely first developed by the Akkadians, but as speakers of a Semitic language, it was continued on and advanced by the Assyrians. In general, Assyrian culture placed a heavy emphasis on writing, most likely as a means of trying to preserve its glory, adding yet another layer to a culture we most often associate with military tradition.

***Scientific Achievement in Ancient Assyria***

Scientific study was relatively concentrated in ancient Assyria. Some historians believe the great libraries were meant to serve as a way to attract the greatest Mesopotamian minds to go to Assyria and take up residence, and this was only possible because the number of people who were educated enough to take up a life of scholarly pursuits were the scribes, of which there were relatively few.

Because scribes needed to be able to understand multiple languages, such as Sumerian, Babylonian, and Akkadian (Sumerian was not a Semitic language like the others mentioned here and was therefore infinitely more difficult for Assyrians to understand) in order to be able to carry out the large amount of transcriptions commissioned by the many Assyrian kings, scribes had access to a large amount of texts that had been produced by

various different cultures. One of the ways they contributed to scientific development was to create large lists.

These lists were usually documentations of plants, animals, cities, kings, etc.

Furthermore, scribes spent a good deal of time compiling information gathered by those who had ventured abroad for military pursuits, using this information to come up with rudimentary maps of the world; of course, these maps only included what we refer to today as the Near East, but to the Assyrians, this would have been the entire world.

Mathematics was also a common pursuit for many Assyrian scribes, although it appears the practice was only carried out as a means of intellectual exercise, meaning there were no practical applications of mathematics in building and land surveying. For example, scribes would commonly write out math problems, what we refer to today as word problems, that required an understanding of multiplication and division. It also appears that Assyrian mathematicians would have used algebra as a means of describing quantities of things, by using letters and other symbols as a means of representing variables.

However, far more impressive than their mathematical achievements were some of their scientific advancements. For example, the Assyrians were able to devise a rather advanced understanding of the lunar cycle, and they used this to create a lunar calendar that proved to be rather useful and accurate. They also had a strong astronomical tradition, believing as most ancient civilizations did that what they saw in the heavens reflected the events to come on Earth.

The calendar developed by the Babylonians and expanded upon by the Assyrians helped to develop the calendar most of the world uses today. They tracked the moon starting with the first new moon after the equinox, and this helped them to divide the year into twelve months of 29 or 30 days. Each day began at sunset and was divided into twelve “double hours” which were divided into 60 “double minutes.” This is the foundation for the 24-hour clock we use today.

However, this system, as one might expect, was unreliable. Weather conditions in Iraq mean many cloudy days, which would have prevented the Assyrians from being able to accurately track celestial movements. Furthermore, by using the moon instead of the sun to track years, each year

was about 11 days shorter than it should have been, which would be added up and turned into a full season after nine years.

It's easy to look back at these accomplishments and dismiss them; many of the things the Assyrians took to be true were eventually improved upon as technology and understanding increased. However, considering this civilization existed more than 2 millennia in the past, their scientific achievements are still worth honoring.

However, as significant as some of the Assyrian cultural achievements were, it should be remembered that their most significant achievements came on the battlefield. Education and literacy were limited to a small group of people, effectively limiting the abilities of the Assyrian Empire to develop its culture much further than it did. The perfection of siege warfare and the use of iron weapons will likely always be remembered as the Assyrians' greatest contribution to world culture, but one should never forget that art, writing, and science were integral parts of this ancient civilization.

# Chapter 10 – Assyrian Religion

Assyrian monarchs considered themselves to be closely related to the gods, and this belief in the divine right to rule meant that religion was an important aspect of the Assyrian Empire throughout its existence. In general, the Assyrians practiced polytheism, believing in many different gods who reigned over different aspects of life. While the Assyrians shared religious beliefs with the Babylonians, they did not have nearly as many gods. The main reason for this is that gods are usually associated with cities, and Babylonia had many more cities than its northern neighbor.

The principal god in Assyrian religion was Ashur. He is the king of all the gods and the creator of the Assyrian people. It is because of this the name Assur was chosen as Assyria's first and main city, and in this city many different temples were constructed in his honor. According to the Assyrian people, the entire Assyrian nation belonged to him, and his kings were mere representatives of Ashur. It was their principle aim to do his bidding and to please him, and the Assyrian kings attributed everything, such as the resources available to them, their military victories, and their own personal intelligence, to Ashur. Many Assyrian kings took a name that started with Ashurt as a way of demonstrating this deep connection they felt with the main Assyrian god.

However, it's worth noting religion in Assyria, as is the case in many ancient civilizations, can best be described as a cult. There is little evidence to suggest that commoners spent much time worshiping the gods, even if they did recognize them as the creators and controllers of destiny. Over time, cities would come to favor one god over the other, and many temples would be erected in honor of that god with a main temple being used as the center of worship in that city. Sacrifice was an important part of worship, as was prayer to idols.

Next to Ashur in importance was Ninurta, who was the god of warfare and hunting, two of the primary activities undertaken by Assyrians. Another major deity was Ishtar, the goddess of battle and love, and she was considered to be the goddess of two major Assyrian cities: Nineveh and Arba'il. Each of these different deities had a unique personality that was discussed in Assyrian literature and portrayed through Assyrian art. But Ashur, on the other hand, was always portrayed as a king and was depicted

as a solemn, austere, and stoic leader who was most concerned with portraying a regal appearance.

The bureaucracy of the temple reflected how religion was used to help maintain control over certain cities. Since the king of Assur, or Assyria as a whole, was the closest to the gods, he was the one who would decide which cities were or were not in good standing with Ashur. The priests who ran a city's main temple were appointed by the king, and if a city went into rebellion or did not meet its tax or tribute obligations, then the king would punish them by withholding the resources needed to maintain the temple which would cause it to fall into disrepair, something that would have been a source of great shame for ancient Assyrians.

But this relationship was not entirely one-sided, as the priests had significant impact over the actions of a king. It was the job of the priest to tell the king when he could or could not go to war and what he should do in order to secure success on his next campaign. In this sense, politics and religion became closely connected, with both sides using the other as a means of advancing their power and influence within the Assyrian state. Of course, in the event of discrepancy, the king, who had the closest relationship with the gods, would always have the final say.

Clearly, religion played a major role in the social control of Assyrian subjects, but this is a phenomenon that existed primarily in the cities closest to Assur and the other major Assyrian metropolises. The Assyrian kings were, generally speaking, tolerant of other religions that they encountered. Conquered cities and territories were almost never asked to convert religion or pay homage to Assyrian gods. But a city's religious monuments were often stolen and taken hostage as a means of coercing them into submission. However, if a city pledged allegiance to an Assyrian king, then these monuments would be returned. Should a rebellion arise, then they could be destroyed, which would have been a near catastrophic event for ancient Mesopotamian peoples, something they would have wanted to avoid at all costs.

Unfortunately, little evidence remains that details the exact nature of religious rites and ceremonies. Either these were never recorded, or such records have never been found. One of the few ceremonies we do know about is *Akitu*, which can best be understood as a celebration of the new year. Nearly every city had its own *Akitu* temple that was usually located outside the walls of the city. Its celebration involved elaborate processions

and a great banquet. It was during this ceremony that the king was granted the right to rule for another year.

Another aspect of Assyrian religion worth mentioning is the art of prognostication. Most Assyrians believed that someone who was in good standing with the gods—mainly the priests—could predict the future, largely through the interpretation of different signs and symbols, such as constellations or weather patterns. The position of "diviner" was one of the top positions in the Assyrian court, as it was this person's job to predict what would happen in upcoming military campaigns.

The sacrifice of lambs was one of the main ways in which diviners would try to predict the outcomes of campaigns. Kings would have scribes write out an "oracle request" on a tablet, which would then be presented to the gods. The lambs would be killed and the diviners would examine some of the organs and entrails for clues as to the outcome of the kingly request. A record was kept of the examination and sent back to the king, who would then have to make a decision based on what was determined at the ceremony. It was not unheard of for a king to ignore the results of these predictions, but it was considered a very bad omen to do so.

Overall, Assyrian religion was not particularly advanced. It was essentially a cult that was used by kings to legitimize their rule and to help them determine the best course of action in war. However, despite its rudimentary form, the Assyrian gods played a major role in the development of Assyrian society and the advancement of its empire.

# Conclusion

Perhaps the best way to think about the Assyrian Empire is a balloon slowly being inflated and deflated from the center of the empire, Assur. Over time, it would grow, shrink, grow again, then shrink again, before it finally grew so big that the only thing left to do was pop. Yet while the structure of power was gone, Assyrian influence would continue to exist well after the fall of the empire.

Considering the level of dominance the Assyrians attained in Mesopotamia over the course of 1,500 years, it's rather surprising that they would fall so quickly. In just 50 years after reaching their peak, Nineveh and Assur were sacked, and Assyria was no more.

However, when we look at the history of this ancient empire, its disappearance does not seem so sudden. While it's true the Assyrians had the most powerful empire in the middle of the 7th century BCE, its grip on power was loose, and its resources were stretched thin. Their neighbors were growing in power and beginning to work together to undermine Assyrian control. And when the Assyrians became too ambitious and began meddling in Babylonian affairs, the stage was set for their demise.

Nonetheless, the history of the Assyrians is still a fascinating one. Throughout history, no other civilization in Mesopotamia would be able to lay claim to as much territory as the Assyrian kings could in the 7th century. Assyrian kings have gone down in history as some of the most capable military leaders ever, and the cultural developments to come out of this period contributed greatly to the development of human civilization.

While it's true that the Assyrians were cruel and ruthless to those who stood in their way, they existed at a time where this type of behavior was required for survival. Had they not risen to the occasion and conquered the kingdoms near them, someone else would have conquered them, as the Babylonians finally did. It was a fierce world, one full of war and instability. But through superior military tactics and just plain old determination, the Assyrians were able to build an empire that will go down in history as one of the most impressive and expansive in the history of the ancient world.

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# Part 5: Babylon
# A Captivating Guide to the Kingdom in Ancient Mesopotamia, Starting from the Akkadian Empire to the Battle of Opis Against Persia, Including Babylonian Mythology and the Legacy of Babylonia

# BABYLON

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO THE KINGDOM IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA, STARTING FROM THE AKKADIAN EMPIRE TO THE BATTLE OF OPIS AGAINST PERSIA, INCLUDING BABYLONIAN MYTHOLOGY AND THE LEGACY OF BABYLONIA

CAPTIVATING HISTORY

# Introduction

When someone hears the word “Babylon,” what do they imagine? If the individual is a fan of language, they might envision a paradise filled with luxury and the finest delights. If they enjoy science fiction, they could conjure up numerous movies and TV shows which play upon the word and build upon its cultural connotations to convey a complex picture like the ill-fated *Babylon 5*. Still, someone raised in the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—might envision a city of depravity which served as a lesson to the faithful to avoid the temptations of the physical world. After all, the Whore of Babylon continues to be an omnipresent figure in popular culture and theological and spiritual discourse.

But what was Babylon?

The short answer: Even in history, it depends on the context. The long answer is more complicated. When someone says Babylon, they could be referring to either a major city, an empire, or an entire group of people which characterized the wider region of Mesopotamia and thousands of years of human history and development. For the purposes of this book, the third definition is used.

The Babylonians were never one static people with a single background but instead developed their civilization over the centuries by incorporating more and more peoples into one great culture. The savvy reader will notice that their history is complex and highly detailed. By the end of this book, readers will be sick of seeing the words “Babylon,” “Babylonia,” “Babylonian,” and “civilization,” but they will come away with a greater understanding of just why this culture is considered one of the most significant and influential of all time.

The Babylonian influence upon its successors and even modern society knows no bounds. One of the leading civilizations of Mesopotamia, the Babylonians provided the fundamentals of mathematics, agriculture, architecture, metallurgy, and other influential and necessary fields required to develop other great civilizations such as the Greeks, Romans, and even contemporary nations like China and the United States. Without them, no neoteric world could exist.

Keeping all of this in mind, it's important to place the Babylonians within the proper context, and that means a brief overview about what Mesopotamia was and why so many civilizations get associated or categorized as Babylonian. Since they existed so long ago, the dates referenced will end with BCE, which stands for Before Common Era, or the start of the contemporary Gregorian calendar. So, when a date like 1850 BCE appears, you want to add the current year plus the number 1850 to find how long ago something occurred. For example: 2018 plus 1850 means the event happened 3,868 years in the past. The story of Babylonia begins in what modern scholars define as Mesopotamia, the landmass in between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in the Near East.

# Chapter 1 – The Land of the Babylonians

The land around the Euphrates River, such as the regions outside of Mesopotamia itself, and in the original Mesopotamia shaped the development of the Babylonian civilization. Ancient Babylonia rested in southern Mesopotamia in the Ancient Near East. For a contemporary audience, this would be roughly the location of modern nations such as Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia. Although the city of Babylon itself would remain around for centuries, the actual civilization and kingdom of the Babylonians would undergo many name changes as different cultures entered the region and merged with existing ones. For example, in the third millennia BCE, central Mesopotamia was known as Akkad while the southern region was Sumer.

Mesopotamia was the origin of human civilization as contemporary peoples know it. Together with Egypt, to which it was connected by the massive Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Mesopotamia formed the basis of civilization through the advent of agriculture, writing, mathematics, architecture, and the other building blocks of culture and society. One of the major reasons for the region's success was the presence of diverse peoples and fertile farmland which provided enough sustenance for individuals to focus on other matters besides finding food. Mesopotamia encompasses the geographical region between the Tigris and Euphrates, which received the moisture it needed from the waters of the rivers and provided fertile farmland.

*The Tigris River*

**Akkad or Upper and Central Mesopotamia**

This section of Mesopotamia was a vast flatland measuring roughly 250 miles in length. The soil would have been reasonably fertile, but not lush. The flatland only experiences one major disruption, which is a range of limestone that branches off of the nearby Zagros mountain range. Numerous settlements existed in this area during the time of the Babylonians, including major cities and large swathes of farmland used to produce agricultural staples like barley. Archaeologists still find many ruins and remnants of old towns and houses in the area.

To the north of the flatland and past the limestone feature is another section of well-watered country with more limestone hills. More farmland existed in this area, and quarries dotted the region to dig out and carve up the limestone for use in construction. At the very tip of this region was the end of the extent of the Babylonian territory. Here, the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers rose up into the ridges of the Zagros mountain range, which separated the Babylonians and their predecessors from their neighbors. In this area would have been the major city of Asur or Assur, as well as the future capital of Nineveh even farther north.

**Sumer or Lower Mesopotamia**

The lower segment of Mesopotamia contained alluvial plains designed for rich agriculture. This area was called Chaldea and was fertilized by the rich deposits left by the Tigris and Euphrates. Several sections of this book will reference the Chaldeans, who are frequently considered to be part of the Babylonian Empire—they were just one of many smaller ethnic groups which formed broader Mesopotamia and the empire itself. To the east is the mountain range of Elam while the west holds the banks of the Euphrates, which separated Mesopotamia from a group of nomadic peoples called the Suti. These Suti did not come from the same general background as the Chaldeans (who were Babylonians) and were one of many Semitic language speaking peoples that dotted the area. Along the south of the Mesopotamian territory were sea marshes where many of the Chaldeans lived alongside other ethnic groups like the Arameans and Kaldy.[2]

Various cities dotted the landscape. To the west of the territory was the famous Ur, the first capital of Mesopotamia and perhaps the oldest known city in existence. It's from this city that the phrase "Ur example" originates, which means the first incidence of something. Babylon rested to the west and possessed numerous suburbs on both sides of the Euphrates. Also in this area were considerable red sandstone deposits and cliffs from which the Babylonians took stone, as well as a freshwater sea called Najaf.

*The Ruins of Babylon – 1932 Photograph*

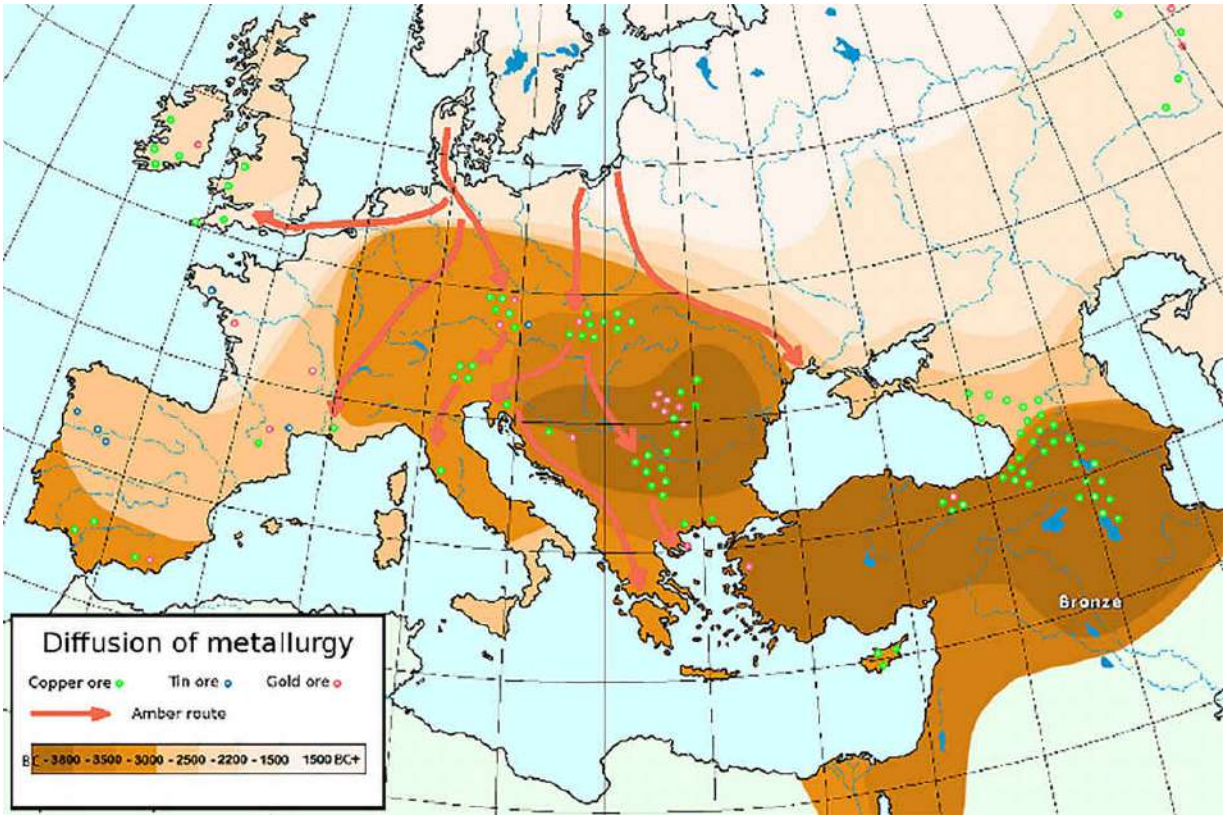
On the east bank of the Euphrates and to the south of Babylon were the significant cities of Kish and Nippur, which would play an important role in

the development of a cohesive civilization. To the east was the Lagash channel that allowed access across the Tigris River. This channel would set the stage for Babylonian conquest and expansion at its neighbors' expense.

It was in this same area that the Sumerians and Akkadians, the Babylonians' ancestors, also developed. When examining the Babylonians, it's impossible not to look at the other two. This is because they were other cultures and ethnic groups which would contribute significantly to the Babylonians' science, religion, and societal structure. When the Babylonian Empire formed, the Sumerians and Akkadians didn't disappear so much as become absorbed into the new civilization and became members of the encompassing term "Babylonian." The same would happen to the Chaldeans and other smaller groups. The absorption or assimilation occurred when the Babylonian ancestors, the Amorites, arrived in the region and started to practice intermarriage and assimilation of their own.

**When Did the Babylonians Live?**

The Babylonians are one of the oldest known organized civilizations, dating back to the 19th century BCE.[3] The civilization would last until the Islamic conquests in the 700s CE, meaning some form of the Babylonians was in existence for a continuous 2,500 years. The Babylonians would have started during the end of the Mesopotamian Bronze Age (3500 BCE – 1500 BCE). This meant that the Babylonians possessed the technology required to craft weapons and tools from bronze, a soft metal that was stronger than original models made of stone. They then transitioned to the Iron Age, where bronze was replaced by the even tougher iron.




*The Diffusion of Metallurgy*

The picture above shows how the region in which the Babylonians lived was one of the first areas to develop metallurgy and bronze weaponry. For this reason, Mesopotamia is frequently called the “cradle of civilization.” Access to and knowledge of bronze metallurgy meant the Babylonians were capable of dominating other areas that had not yet acquired such technology. In essence, it gave them an advantage that allowed the civilization to thrive. It was in this environment that the Babylonians started their journey that would go down in the annals of history.

# Chapter 2 – Life, Culture, and Gender Roles Throughout the Years

Considering the Babylonians developed over two and a half millennia, their culture varied greatly. However, ancient civilizations also didn't experience changes as quickly as many modern societies, and historians and archaeologists are unable to track more minute developments such as favorite foods or outfits in each century. On a large level, historians do know that Babylonia was characterized by the same militaristic monarchy of other civilizations, meaning there was usually a warrior king supported by some wealthy nobles who took positions as generals, priests, and administrators. The economy was driven mainly through trade, but the majority of individuals would have worked as farmers trying to grow enough food for themselves and their families. This chapter provides a broad overview of what the average Babylonian, those farmers and sometimes traders, would consider daily life, including gender roles, potential jobs, and the kind of food that could have been eaten.

**The Role of Men and Women**

Men dominated the public sphere of the Babylonian world. They were the primary holders of property, the heads of households and families, and were all expected to work outside of the home. They could be free men who worked in the military or government, and they formed the majority of the labor force. Some sample work a typical man might do could be planting and harvesting crops, constructing buildings and bridges, recording administrative records, fighting as a soldier, or brewing beer. Because they controlled the public sphere, men were seen as the "standard" citizens. Their opinions mattered more than those of women and children, and they held the ultimate control over their wives and children. Although women could be influential, the Babylonian world was dominated by men.

Almost everything to do within the home was considered women's work, as well as the gathering and refining of materials. Some scholars summarize the separation of the genders best by describing the role of the man as the provider of raw materials like grain and wool, while the role of the woman was to take these goods and create a finished product like bread or fabric for clothing. Since women maintained the home, they also needed to go out

every day and draw water from a nearby river, canal, or stream. One of their main tasks was the gathering of firewood as well, which could be obtained by picking up dropped sticks or chopping branches from nearby trees.

Sumerian and Babylonian texts from the third and second millennia BCE indicate that women did work outside of the home, usually as domestic servants and laborers for merchants and wealthier families. The Babylonians appeared to pay laborers with either silver or barley, which was administered based on a person's age and gender. For example, a man who worked for a month could receive 190 cups of barley, while a woman would receive 139.[4] Although there was definitely a fair amount of misogyny involved since women were not as valued as men; the chief reason the Babylonians paid men more was because they required more food. Even though women also performed backbreaking labor, they were able to get by with less nutrition and food consumed than a man of equivalent size.

Interestingly, if there were severe agricultural issues, such as poor harvests, employers would pay laborers with less barley but would make up the difference with dates. For example, a woman might receive only 84.5 cups of barley but would then be given 13 dates as well. Still, even when employers paid in silver, women received only one-third of the wages of men and sometimes even only one-fourth. Some historians speculate that part of the difference occurred because men, being naturally stronger, could do harder labor, but all agree that the low Babylonian opinion of women played a significant role.

So, what was the kind of work men and women did? Men could develop specialized skills to become merchants and craftsmen, but the majority were poor farmers who spent their days toiling in the fields, digging furrows, planting crops, and then harvesting them at the end of the season. Some wealthier individuals could become rudimentary blacksmiths who made tools and weapons while others bought and sold goods. Many men dedicated their lives to the military and became soldiers, though poorer individuals were not well-equipped and would often die in battle. If a man could become educated, he might become an administrator that kept records and worked with the king and nobility, but he would have to be noble himself. Finally, many men worked as poor day laborers and construction workers who were employed by the month.

As for the women, many of their duties involved taking materials and turning them into something useful. Besides weaving, grinding wheat, and baking, women also dug trenches for canals, laid building foundations, built sluices, made the furrows in fields for crops, gathered harvests, pressed oil, and carried materials like bricks to construction sites. Records indicate that a free woman could be obliged to become a slave worker for a period of time for which her husband would be paid with a small plot of land. The wife did not have a say in her employment. In addition, women held primary responsibilities when it came to raising and educating children. It was common for a mother to labor during the day and bring her children with her, where they would then become child workers who earned meager wages.

**Marriage, Sexuality, Family, and Divorce**

For the majority of Babylonians, marriage was the most important event in an individual's life. Many rituals, laws, and cultural practices surrounded the engagement, wedding, and then following covenant of marriage between a man and woman. For men, the average age of marriage would be between 18 and 20. For women, a young girl could expect to be married shortly after she got her first period, usually between 13 and 14. This age of marriage for women did create some problems since maternal mortality rates during and after childbirth were extremely high. Although the girls had gotten their periods, their bodies were frequently not fully developed, and they therefore suffered greatly when trying to have children.

Marriage was one of the most essential institutions for the Babylonians, and numerous ancient texts praise marriage going back over a period of 3,000 years. Religious texts decreed that it was the ultimate destiny of men and women to form happy pairs that produced healthy children. A satisfying sex life was seen as central to this institution, and religious and cultural sources encouraged husbands and wives to find joy in one another's arms. Early Babylonian (officially Sumerian) proverbs explained these ideas, as did the depiction of female demons who were unable to experience the pleasure of marriage and children. One proverb went thusly:

May Inanna let a wife with hot hips lie down with you. May she present you with sons with broad arms. May she search out a place of happiness for you.[5]

A “wife with hot hips” refers to a woman who is sexually aroused. The Babylonians believed an aroused woman who orgasmed was more fertile and thus more likely to have healthy children, especially sons. Something that might come as a surprise to a modern audience was how candid the Babylonians were about sexuality. Women were expected to be virgins upon marriage and men were not, but both married individuals were expected to enjoy one another and have sex frequently. Indeed, it was seen as the most common activity of a happy, healthy living individual, which is why the demons of the Babylonian religion were so evil—they never got to experience life as an accomplished woman. Their description was as follows, and shows just how important marriage and sex was seen for the average woman:

The maiden is like a woman who never had intercourse.

The maiden is like a woman who was never deflowered.

The maiden never experienced sex in her husband’s life.

The maiden never peeled off her clothes on her husband’s lap.

The maiden’s clasp no nice-looking lad ever loosened.

The maiden had no milk in her breasts; only bitter liquid exudes.

The maiden never climaxed sexually, nor satisfied her desires in a man’s lap.[6]

Likewise, a man’s life without marriage was seen as empty and barren. However, this doesn’t mean that romantic love was encouraged. Marriage for the Babylonians, as with many ancient civilizations, was transactional. For an engagement to take place, a man had to come to an agreement with his future father-in-law about a marriage price. He would bestow gifts upon his intended betrothed and paid a set amount to her father before the marriage could take place.

If the future husband and wife were both free individuals and not slaves, then the wedding consisted of the woman being delivered to her future husband’s house. He would place a veil upon her head and cover her face, declaring that she was his wife. After this, he would pour perfume over her head and then present her with gifts. Once married, the couple needed to decide future living arrangements. Sometimes the new wife would return to live with her father. If this were the case, the husband would give her a payment known as a *dumaki*, which went toward the maintenance of the

house. If the couple chose to live together, the wife would bring a *sherigtu* with her, or the equivalent of a dowry.

This *sherigtu* was entirely the wife's property and could not be claimed by her husband's brothers if the husband died. Likewise, she got to keep any marriage presents given to her by her husband, such as jewelry. However, if the wife died without having any children, then the price her husband paid for her needed to be returned to him. If the husband chose to divorce his wife, then he owed the former father-in-law satisfaction, usually some amount of money.

Babylonian men typically only took one wife if she lived and produced children, especially male heirs. However, it was perfectly legal for men to enter more than one marriage or engage in relations with a concubine to try to have more children. Although it was allowed, it culturally wasn't accepted if the husband was not noble or had a wife who did produce children and survived. If a man did take a concubine, she was incorporated into the household but could only wear a veil, the symbol of a married woman, outside when walking with the wife. Her position in the household would always be inferior to the legal wife, and the concubine was usually chosen from the slaves.

Once children were born to a married couple, the husband then became a father and the head of the household. He retained the power of life and death over his wife and offspring. Some of his powers included leaving children with creditors as security for the repayment of a debt, sending them to work, and choosing whom to leave money and property too—although the eldest son also retained some rights. If the man died, his sons could claim his property and kick their mother out of the home, but they might need to fight their uncles.

Finally, there was the possibility of divorce. Surprisingly, the Babylonian law codes did eventually allow for women to initiate a divorce. In particular, laws appeared in codes dictated by the famous Hammurabi. If a woman could provide evidence of severe abuse or neglect on the part of her husband, then she was free to leave his home and return to that of her parents. Meanwhile, a man could initiate a divorce for two main reasons: his wife proved to be infertile or was accused of adultery. No one suspected that a man could be infertile.

However, divorce was heavily stigmatized, and the husband would always have to return the dowry he received from the marriage. To avoid social ostracizing, most unhappy couples remained together. Husbands usually added a concubine to the family or started affairs, and women would carry out their own illicit activities in secret.

Adultery was a punishable offense for women and their lovers. Babylonian law dictated that a cuckolded husband could have his unfaithful wife and her lover or lovers thrown in the river to drown. If he wished to spare his wife, then he also had to let her lover go. Punishment for adultery was all or nothing. Married men were not punished for carrying out affairs unless they were caught with a married woman who was not his wife.[7]

Now, this is an overview of the general structure of Babylonian marriage and divorce throughout three millennia. Naturally, Sumerian, Akkadian, and then official Babylonian men and women would have different levels of power and slightly changed social norms depending on which culture held the most influence and power at a given time. The most major change that can be seen over the millennia was the diminishing role of women. While the Sumerians gave women unprecedented power in the ancient world to leave an unhappy marriage and home, and even depicted women as having incredible power over their husbands, this rapidly changed under the Akkadians and the Babylonians.

**Food**

Modern historians and archaeologists know a great deal about Babylonian cuisine because chefs preserved their recipes on clay tablets which were then discovered many millennia later. From these tablets, it can be discerned that one of the most common foods eaten by the Babylonians was stew. A stew could be made from all of the leftovers and bits found by wives and slaves in their households and then preserved for days by being left in the heat. Some common ingredients for stew included meat, hardy vegetables, and locally found herbs.

The meats could be from any of the common animals shepherded by locals. These included mutton (sheep meat), pork, poultry, fish, and some beef. However, most people did not eat meat often since it was difficult and costly to raise an animal to only slaughter it for meat. A commoner would be lucky to have some form of meat once a week. Onions were the most common vegetable, and garlic could be used as seasoning.[8]

Bread made from barley was the primary staple of the Babylonian diet. Barley could be grown in a variety of environments found throughout the Babylonian territory and provided efficient nutrition. Men would frequently be the harvesters of barley and would bring the grain to women, who would spend hours grinding it down with a mortar and pestle. Afterward, they would take the flour to make dough that could be cooked into flat loaves eaten for dinner. Accompanying the barley bread was often locally grown fruits such as figs, plums, melons, and dates.

The drink of choice was beer made from excess barley rather than wine. This beer would not be the same as modern beer. Instead, it had a lower alcohol content to make it more palatable and drinkable throughout the day. The primary reason the Babylonians drank beer was to avoid becoming sick from drinking river water, especially since the river was used for bathing, washing clothes, and often using the bathroom. Both men and women were involved in the manufacture of barley beer.

In 2018, a collaborative team from Yale University and Harvard University gathered information from existing cuneiform clay tablets and attempted to reconstruct and make several ancient Babylonian recipes. Two prominent scholars helped head the team, Agnete Lassen and Chelsea Alene Graham. Lassen was the associate curator of the Yale Babylonian Collection while Graham was the digital imaging specialist for the Institute of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage.[9] Their goal was to develop three separate stews. Recreating the meals was difficult as the tablets were poorly preserved, some ingredients were not available, and there were no measurements. The results, however, were delicious.

**Language**

The Babylonians used a language known as Akkadian, which they took from their predecessors the Akkadians. No one speaks this language any longer as it was an ancient Semitic tongue written in a cuneiform script. Cuneiform was an early system of writing developed by Sumerians. It featured many wedge-shaped symbols which represented different spoken syllables. The symbols were made by pressing a reed into wet clay, which could then be erased. Sometimes, scribes baked the tablets to preserve the writing. The heat from the ovens would harden the clay, forming hard slabs that could then be passed to other scholars or educated members of society —usually the nobility or wealthy merchants.

*A Cuneiform Letter, c. 2400 BCE*

**Buildings and Architecture**

Despite the civilization's age, the Babylonians are known for their art and general creativity when it comes to building and architecture. For instance, instead of the traditional square or rectangular bricks, the Babylonians made bricks with rounded edges. These bricks weren't the most stable but were aesthetically pleasing and contributed to the unique look of structures like the ziggurat, a type of temple.

According to one older historian by the name of Archibald Sayce, the most common building materials for homes and temples were still stone and brick. In one of his monographs, he describes Babylonian architecture as follows:

Stone was scarce, but was already cut into blocks and seals. Brick was the ordinary building material, and with it cities, forts, temples and houses were constructed. The city was provided with towers and stood on an artificial platform; the house also had a tower-like appearance. It was provided with a door which turned on a hinge, and could be opened with a sort of key; the city gate was on a larger scale, and seems to have been double. ... Demons were feared who had wings like a bird, and the foundation stones – or rather bricks – of a house were consecrated by certain objects that were deposited under them.[10]

His descriptions match modern interpretations. Most Babylonian buildings were built on slightly raised platforms to keep dust and dirt out of the house and prevent flooding during the rainy season. Mud bricks were the most

common building material because they were simple, cheap, and plentiful. Stone was reserved for the wealthy or for influential edifices such as the central temples of the cities, including the famous ziggurats. Most buildings did not use mortar, the material that keeps bricks together. Instead, the Babylonians relied on the weight of the bricks and the skill of their architecture to keep structures standing. In the cases of temples and palaces, large buttresses were used.

Other notable architectural features were drains used to keep water and runoff away from the bases of buildings. These drains could be as simple as dirt ditches or as elaborate as large half-pipes made of lead. Many bricks could be plated as time went on, with etchings or thin layers of gold for decoration. Frescoes and wall decorations additionally appeared as art developed. Walls were almost never plain and were frequently painted in bright, vibrant colors through the use of plant dyes. Some common colors appear to be the basic yellow and blue that could be made from wildflowers and berries.

The Babylonians were also one of the first Mesopotamian civilizations to step away from the traditional bas-relief. A bas-relief was a sculpture carved into a massive section of stone. It wasn't an engraving, but rather an elaborate image that was given some three-dimensional shape and development by cutting around the desired image. Instead of these bas-reliefs, the Babylonians started to create fully three-dimensional statues that stood alone. This was because stone was considered a precious and finite resource, and it was important not to waste material by only cutting out part of an image and leaving so much stone behind to form a backdrop.

*An Assyrian Bas-Relief from 716-713 BCE*

**Clothing**

It's difficult to tell what the Babylonians personally wore since not many depictions survived the sands of time. Archaeologists and historians can tell that most of the Babylonian wardrobe seemed borrowed wholesale from the Sumerians. This meant that both men and women typically wore outfits made from sewn fabric that formed medium to long skirts and shawls. These skirts typically went to a man's knees or a woman's ankles and had some form of fringe around the hem that was plain or elaborate depending on a person's wealth or status. The skirt was held in place by a thick woven belt that was tied in the back to keep the front lines of the garment neat and clean. Since the majority of individuals were poor laborers, clothing was typically the dirty white or brown of undyed wool.[11]

The shawls were long pieces of fabric that could be wrapped around a person's shoulders to cover the breasts and parts of the shoulders. Women, although modest, did appear to be allowed to show the area around the collarbone in a manner similar to contemporary V-neck tops. As time went on, women started to replace the more traditional skirt and shawl combo with long woolen dresses that went to their feet and could be cinched around the waist with belts. Many continued to wear shawls on top for modesty and added decoration.

Almost all women were required by custom to cover their heads with a veil for modesty. The only ones who did not were slaves who were not seen as deserving the status implied by the presence of a veil. Men did not have the same obligation, but frequently wore some form of covering as protection from the sun while out farming or trading. Their most distinctive feature was the presence of long, carefully curled beards that indicated a man was an adult. Most individuals wore a form of sandal as protection from the ground, while soldiers and the nobility could afford high-quality leather boots.

Both genders wore jewelry, which was highly prized. The king typically wore an elaborate hairnet woven from gold strands, while wealthier nobles could afford to use golden ribbons in their hair. The most prized pieces were gold earrings, which could be shaped like crosses, walnuts, or simple rings. People also wore bracelets, necklaces, and bands that featured woven religious symbols, flowers, and even animals like birds. Not everyone could afford jewelry, but even commoners used simple woven pieces as decorations and status symbols.

# Chapter 3 – Where Superstition Met Science

Numerous members of a modern audience frequently scoff at the idea of ancient civilizations being technologically advanced, but such individuals often forget that every human must build from the ground up. Simply speaking, someone can't go to college without first having attended kindergarten. This analogy is by no means meant to cheapen the advancements of the Babylonians. It takes a keen mind to be able to chart the heavens and determine how to properly size the area of a geometric shape. Could any of this volume's readers do it if they hadn't been taught the formulas in school?

Out of the various academic fields, the areas where the Babylonians excelled were mathematics and astronomy or astrology, which built off of one another. However, they also failed in some important ones. For example, the Babylonians did not have a good concept of anatomy, physiology, virology, or basic medicine. Instead, many of their methods relied on superstitions to work out a cure, and death was disturbingly common even among individuals who had seen a physician.

**Medicine**

Babylonian medicine included more superstition than science. Physicians left records of the most common and popular cures on clay tablets, but many of the ingredients involved would have had little to no effect on the diseases or ailments they were supposed to treat. Some could actually make an individual sicker than planned. Anatomy was also not well understood. Although physicians and professionals called diviners would dissect deceased humans and animals to examine their organs, they didn't know what each one did. For example, the liver was considered the most important and the source of the body's blood. Songs even included the liver in place of where a modern audience might use the heart.

A Babylonian physician would devise treatments for a broad range of issues such as respiratory diseases, infections, mental illnesses that caused sadness or hallucinations, poor circulation, trouble conceiving a child, and epilepsy. However, their diagnoses had almost nothing to do with the body. If there was a physical problem with an individual, physicians thought there was a supernatural cause, usually disfavor with a god or the work of evil spirits.

With this in mind, physicians frequently created treatments also based in superstition.

One famous example includes the sighting of pigs. If, while on the way to treat a patient, a physician spied a white pig, then the patient would recover. If they spotted a black pig, the patient was doomed. Other colors possessed different meanings as well. The physician might also look at the color of a patient's urine to check for problems. If the urine came out black, then the individual would die—as they would in modern times, usually, so the Babylonians were correct here. Clear urine was usually a sign of recovery, while red or bloody urine meant the illness was severe, but recovery was possible. This sounds like a rudimentary understanding of some common issues related to the bladder and kidneys, which would be prone to infections from poor sanitation and hygiene.

Physicians manufactured their own medicines and also performed surgeries. There was no anesthetic so anyone who needed work done would be in a lot of pain before, during, and after. One potential practice was giving the patient alcohol to keep them numb and distracted. Medicine could be a salve, potion, rubbing oil, a coated wrap, and even enemas. They included a combination of rare and mundane ingredients. Some recipes taken from tablets included:

Heat in premium beer nlnu, mountain plant, hasu, nuhurtu, juniper, kukru, sumlalu, ballukku, cuttings of aromatics, field-clod, plants – filter and cool them, add oil into the mixture – pour it into his anus and he will recover.[12]

This particular cure was for excessive flatulence and bloating. Other medicines could have been for something called sun disease, which was most likely sunburn, and what the Babylonians considered kidney disease. Their kidney disease was characterized by discolored urine and the frequent need to pee, so they were actually quite close to the truth.

The Babylonian system of healthcare was codified and made official during the time of Hammurabi. Laws were made official by being inscribed on the Code of Hammurabi, which was made around 1750 BCE and carved out of an 8 ft. tall piece of black diorite. Some of the laws included:

If the doctor has treated a man for a severe wound with lances of bronze and has caused the man to die, or has opened an abscess of the eye for a man and has caused the loss of the man's eye, one shall cut off his hands.

If a doctor has treated the severe wound of a slave of a poor man with a bronze lances and has caused his death, he shall render slave for slave.

If he has opened his abscess with a bronze lances and has made him lose his eye, he shall pay money, half his price.

If a doctor has cured the shattered limb of a gentleman, or has cured the diseased bowel, the patient shall give five shekels of silver to the doctor.[13]

*The Top of the Hammurabi Code*

Being a physician was a dangerous profession. If something went wrong—and considering the cures, this would have happened often—then the physician could be mutilated or killed as punishment. There was no such thing as revoking a license.

A sick individual could also contact an exorcist. Since physical complaints were thought to be caused by a supernatural force, it wasn't uncommon for someone to seek out spiritual help. The exorcist's job was to drive away any bad spirits that might be hanging around an individual and causing ailments. This could be done by burning incense or plants, chanting, uttering prayers, or more physical remedies. More often than not, the exorcist would be contacted to deal with a mental health issue, such as hallucinations or chronic anxiety.

**Mathematics**

The Babylonians understood basic arithmetic and algebra, and even developed tables and tablets designed to provide answers without the user needing to do any complex mathematics. These are similar to the multiplication and division tables given to students in schools around the world today, but these were more sophisticated and capable of solving greater and more finicky equations.

Geometry was also understood. Much of what historians know come from several baked clay tablets which demonstrate some of the mathematical formulas that the Babylonians used for building and measuring the world around them. One of the greatest discoveries was that the Babylonians understood the basic rules necessary to measure the area and volume of multiple shapes. For example, they were able to figure out the circumference of a circle by measuring the diameter and then multiplying by three. They could also figure out the area by squaring the circumference and then dividing by twelve. In essence, these formulas looked like this:

- 3(diameter of the circle) = circumference of the circle
- (Circumference of the circle x circumference of the circle)/12 = area of the circle

Why is this so significant? The Babylonians had figured out the concept of pi or π, and approximated the number by using the easier concept of multiplying by 3. 3 is so close to pi that historians believe its usage was not a coincidence. There is even evidence that the Babylonians were aware that 3 was only an approximation—one Old Babylonian tablet found near Susa actually lists pi as 3.125 instead of 3 but indicates that it's more practical for laborers to simplify the equation for easier calculations. For those unfamiliar with mathematics, 3.125 is only 0.5% lower than the full value of pi. Without pi, numerous facets of architecture would be impossible.

Outside of the circle, the Babylonians also understood how to find the volume of cylinders and similar shapes, and inscribed the correct formulas on their tablets. Surprisingly though, they did not know how to correctly determine the volume of a square pyramid despite building complex structures like the ziggurat.

More impressive was the Babylonian work in the field of astronomy. As mentioned earlier, the civilization featured numerous keen astronomers who kept detailed records of the heavens. Recorded in their tablets was the regular motion of the planets, the directions and angles at which stars rose

and set in the sky, when solar and lunar eclipses occurred on the calendar, and how the position of celestial bodies indicated that the world was spherical. The Babylonians even used complex systems like the Fourier analysis to create vast tables of astronomical positions—and the modern Fourier analysis would not be rediscovered until the 1950s.

**The Importance of Mathematics**

Many understand mathematics to be the building blocks of the world. Without it, humans could not understand how they make their way through physical space, how to calculate distance, how to build solid structures, or how to measure the solids and liquids frequently traded, sold, and consumed throughout time. Or, at least they could not do so accurately.

The Babylonian mathematical discoveries are some of the earliest in existence, predating even the Greeks, whom much of the Western world copied when making "new" scientific discoveries from the medieval period onward. In fact, the Greeks actually wound up copying the work of the Babylonians during the Hellenistic Period, which came over 1,000 years after the Babylonians made their initial discoveries. As far as archaeologists and historians can estimate, Babylonian mathematical knowledge was transferred to Greek civilization following the conquests of Alexander the Great in Mesopotamia and the surrounding region around the 330s BCE.

Alexander the Great, although known for his military triumphs and prowess, additionally emphasized the importance of sharing knowledge and cultural practices. After all, his own soldiers did turn on him after viewing his assimilation into Persian culture as a betrayal to his Macedonian heritage. During his conquest, Alexander ordered Callisthenes of Olynthus, his official chronicler, to compile professionals that would translate the entire body of Babylonian astronomical tables and records.

The Greeks would take these records and make some astonishing discoveries with them that shaped the modern world, including new methods of calculating the calendar and the positions of known planets like Venus and Jupiter. It also facilitated the introduction of complex mathematical concepts further into Hellenistic culture. Some examples of significant mathematical implementations included the Greeks learning to divide a circle into 360 degrees and 60 arc minutes.

Babylonian astrology represents the combination of astronomy with religion. In their worldview, it was as much a science as the calculations

indicating where the planets and constellations existed in the sky. The Babylonian, also called Chaldean, astrologers created the foundations of the modern zodiac and heavily influenced their Hellenistic counterparts. Considering how faithfully they mapped the stars and the sheer importance of the deities to everyday life, it should be no surprise to learn that the Babylonians believed the gods would send messages to humans through omens left in the sky.

**The Enuma Anu Enlil, Astronomy, and Astrology**

The Enuma Anu Enlil is a series of clay tablets written by the Babylonian astrologers in a cuneiform script. It reveals between 6,500 and 7,000 omens that astrologers believed would affect the king or empire in some way or another if they appeared. Some of them were based on real occurrences, but the majority were not. Many translations are currently held in the State Archives of Assyria, which is an intellectual project based in Helsinki, Finland. The entire Enuma Anu Enlil has yet to be translated, and there are numerous gaps in the text from sections where the cuneiform wore thin or disappeared from erosion. Still, it is from here where historians get much of their information about the importance of astrology and divination.

**Omens**

An omen was a prophetic message which astrologers needed to find and interpret to pass the information along to the priests and king. The Babylonians developed detailed lists of common omens or symbols and their meanings, which were inscribed into traditional clay tablets and then baked for repeated use. An omen could be divided into two parts: the *protasis* and the *apodosis*. Anyone familiar with the craft of writing will recognize these two words, which are based in Greek. The *protasis* was the initial observation and a corresponding hypothesis about the meaning of a symbol. The *apodosis* was the actual outcome of the observed omen. In the tablets, astrologers would keep long lists of seen omens and what happened as a result. In this way, it actually was a form of sophisticated science even if it was built on the wrong assumptions.

Another similarity between Babylonian astrology and science was the presence of theories and hypotheses. The astrologers already exhibited traits of a scientific method of sorts when they tracked an omen and discovered a corresponding event. It was, in its own rudimentary way, simple cause and effect. But the Babylonians went further. Using elements from religious

stories, they included in their tablets potential portents or omens and their outcomes. They made hypotheses and theories. However, they had no way to test them, and many of the omens they imagined would have been absolutely impossible considering what humans know now about the laws of nature. But the astrologers still applied fundamental scientific principles to understand the world around them, and this is why Babylonian astrology could be considered a form of science—if not for a modern audience, then for the Babylonians themselves.

To understand omens, one must understand the Babylonian worldview. Although religion is covered in depth later on, it's important to know that the Babylonians existed in a deeply religious society where deities were not static figures. Instead, they were active participants in daily life. The will and favor of the divine resulted in tangible and physical benefits on earth. Even more intriguing was the concept that the earth and the heavens were connected in a sphere. Think of a ball. To the Babylonians, the earth would be the lower half and the sky the upper. All around the edge were connections between the two. Not the atmospheric ones known in contemporary society, but actual physical points of contact. This is because in the Babylonian religion, the goddess Tiamat had been rent in two and used to form the heavens and earth.

With all of this in mind, omens could be considered the gods writing messages on the upper half of the world, and it was therefore the task of humans down below to discern the meaning. Even once this meaning was found, the future was not set. This concept was common among the ancient civilizations of the Near East and northern Africa. Even if the Babylonians found an omen, it did not mean that the event would happen. It was actually a judgment of the gods who, in their wisdom, had seen what could happen and chose to pass the information to the Babylonians. The gods gave, in the words of French historian Jean Bottéro, "a verdict against the interested parties on the basis of the elements in the omen, just as each sentence by a tribunal established the future of the guilty person based upon the dossier submitted to its judgement."[14]

So, once the Babylonian astrologers discovered an omen and interpreted it, they told the results to the king and the priests. It was then the task of these officials to find ways to either prevent or facilitate the outcome. This was done by performing rituals and sacrifices to the relevant deities. To give an example, if the astrologers found a sign indicating that the king was to die

soon, he and the high priests would attempt to stop the death from occurring by sacrificing expensive animals like bulls and oxen, anointing the statues of the chief deity as well as the god of the underworld, and performing as many rituals as possible. This could be considered an appeal to the divine high court. Then, the gods would make their judgment. If they were pleased, the king would live. If not, he would die.

**The Constellations, Zodiac, and Planets**

The Babylonians possessed a complex system for understanding the movements of the planets and the stars. Similar to a modern zodiac, they believed that the positions of certain celestial bodies influenced the world and especially an individual. Depending on the composition of the sky at one's birth, a person would possess different personality traits, characteristics, and fortunes in life.

The Babylonian sky was divided into three main subsections named after the trio of chief deities: Anu, the god of the sky and chief deity; Enlil, the god of weather; and Ea, the god of water. They did not have planets associated with them, but other deities did. The planets were not thought to be the gods, but rather representations or symbols of their power. Planetary positions were associated with specific days, months, and years that were said to be favorable to each deity.[15]

The most important "planets" to the Babylonians were the moon and the sun. For the sun, a special emphasis was placed on its size and position on the different days of the calendar, and that was the main data astrologers examined to determine omens and portents. The moon, meanwhile, was divided into four quadrants. Each quadrant was associated with a separate section of the Babylonian Empire: the north represented Subartu, the south was Akkad, the east was Elam, and the west was Amurru. The fullness of the moon was significant. Astrologers additionally placed great weight on solstices and eclipses, as well as the different phases of the moon. The size and brightness of the sun and moon were also considered and recorded in clay tablets.

**The Deities and Their Planets**

| **Planet** | **Deity** | **Deity's Domain** |
|---|---|---|
| Sun | Shamash | Justice, Truth, and Order |
| Moon | Sin | Cattle and Fertility |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Mercury | Nabu | Wisdom and Writing |
| Venus | Ishtar | Love, Sexuality, and War |
| Mars | Nergal | Death, the Underworld, Pestilence, and Plague |
| Saturn | Ninurta | Healing and Agriculture |
| Jupiter | Marduk | The City of Babylon |

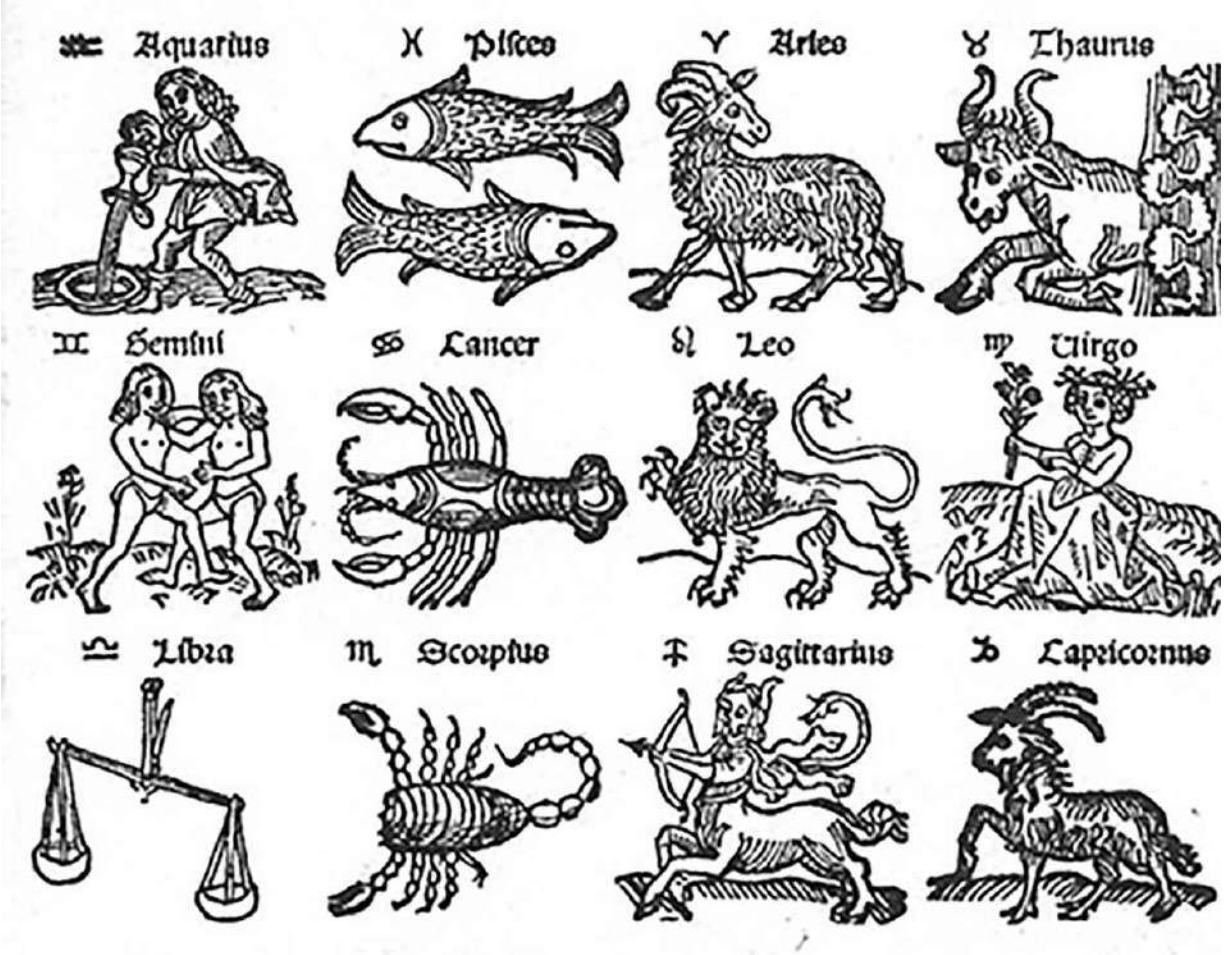
Anyone familiar with the modern zodiac and Greek and Roman mythology will see similarities between the deities the Babylonians assigned to specific planets and their domains, and the ones chosen by the Greeks. These domains also heavily influence how modern astrologers and people interested in astrology in general interpret the presence and movements of different planets. For example, Venus being Ishtar's planet is reminiscent of Venus representing Aphrodite for the Greeks and being a common symbol of love, desire, and sexuality. Likewise, Jupiter is Marduk, who would supplant Anu as the chief Babylonian god once Hammurabi rose to power. In Greek, Jupiter was Zeus, also the chief deity.

*Jupiter as Seen by the Cassini Space Probe*

## The Zodiac

Most information that historians and archaeologists possess about Babylonian astrology comes from a document called MUL.APIN or "The Plow." Dating indicates the tablet was created around 1000 BCE. It contains roughly 71 stars and constellations that the Babylonians observed with some regularity. The Babylonians did keep track of seventeen or eighteen specific constellations but didn't assign them the same meanings that contemporary individuals do. The planetary movement in and around the constellations did have specific meanings that varied based on position. What's interesting about the Babylonian constellations is that they identified most of the major ones associated with the modern zodiac and actually gave them similar names. Some examples are included here:

- Aries: LU.HUN.GA – "Field Worker"
- Taurus: GU.AN.NA – "The Heavenly Bull" or "The Sacred Bull"
- Gemini: MASH.TA.BA – "The Twins"
- Cancer: AL.LUL – "Crayfish"
- Leo: UR.GU.LA – "Lion"
- Virgo: AB.SIN – "The Seed-Furrow" or "Daughter of Sin"
- Libra: ZI.BA.AN.NA or GISH.ERIN – "Heavenly Fate" or "The Scales"
- Scorpio: GIR.TAB – "The Scorpion"
- Sagittarius: PA.BIL.SAG – "The Defender"
- Capricorn: SUHUR.MASH – "The Goat Fish"
- Aquarius: GU.LA – "The Lord of Waters"
- Pisces: SIM.MAH – "Fishes" or "The Tails"




*A 15th Century Woodcut of the Zodiac Signs*

This image, taken from a European woodcut from the 1400s, demonstrates how Babylonian interpretations of the different constellations, as well as their early work on the zodiac, would go on to influence the Greeks, Romans, and then European culture. This is a little-known fact for many people, but the zodiac was also a popular symbol in Christian artwork, with the image of Jesus often appearing surrounded by the signs of the zodiac. The Babylonians' influence was far-reaching indeed.

**Divination**

Similar to astrology was the practice of divination. While astrology focused solely on identifying portents in the skies, divination referred to finding signs and omens down on earth in physical mediums regular humans could access. Diviners were the practitioners of this practice, and they relied on many lists of omens similar to astrologers. Some of the mediums they looked at were birds in the sky, the growth of plants, birth defects in humans and animals, and the movement of smoke and water when it was

asked questions. Combined with astrology, Babylonian culture dictated that it was possible to figure out what future events pertained to an individual. For example, the Babylonians thought they could tell if someone would live, die, get sick, have a healthy pregnancy, or marry well.

As with astrology, divination included omens, some which were common and some which were never seen. Their lists include some unusual omens with listed meanings—omens that have never appeared in human history. For example, take a cow. It's common for a cow to give birth to a single calf while two is rare. The birth of two calves was a sign or an omen, but the Babylonians didn't stop there. They listed potential outcomes for the births of three, four, five, and even eight calves from a single cow.

Another practice was hepatoscopy. The Babylonians are well-known for their hepatoscopy, which is the examination of the liver of an animal to determine the future. They firmly believed that the liver was the most central and significant organ of human and animal alike. By their logic, the liver was the source of the blood in the body and therefore supplied the life source. A priest, known as a bārû, trained in the practice of hepatoscopy and the interpretation of signs discovered in the liver. Multiple professionals developed a full compendium called the Bārûtu. The Babylonians made clay liver models to better help train bārûs and explain what signs would look like. Archaeologists found several dating to the 19$^{th}$ or 18$^{th}$ century BCE.

The study of the liver could also be done to predict the weather, such as whether there would be favorable conditions for healthy crops. Hepatoscopy was part of the larger practice of studying animal entrails in general for portents, which is called extispicy.

Because the Babylonians had another clear system for determining and predicting the future, divination is also counted as a primitive science for this civilization, even if it was based more in religion and magic than the hard facts common in contemporary study. Similar to astrology, diviners once again based the results of their omens on careful study and then made their own predictions and hypotheses for other results. An individual can also see similarities between the practices of astrology and divination and how the Babylonians studied medicine, seen earlier.

# Chapter 4 – Babylonia Before the Babylonians

The Babylonians are frequently understood as another empire in the long history of Mesopotamia that developed from the same peoples that formed earlier civilizations. They are considered broadly Mesopotamian in culture, dress, language, and religion. For this reason, it's important to understand who and what came before the official Babylonian Empire, as the civilization drew heavily from its predecessors such as the Sumerians and Akkadians.

## The Origins of Babylonia

The roots of the Babylonians can be traced back to roughly 3500 BCE when a well-developed Sumerian civilization started to emerge. The Sumerians are one of the oldest human civilizations on record. They were followed by a new group of individuals who spoke an early form of Akkadian around 3000 BCE. At some point, these two peoples engaged in such intense trade and social interaction that the majority of the region became bilingual, which allowed for intense and intimate culture sharing and borrowing. Even the languages became mixed together as people started to employ idioms, phrases, words, and even whole portions of grammar to get their ideas across.

Eventually, Akkadian became more popular than the original Sumerian. Some scholars suggest this happened because the number of speakers with Akkadian as a first language slowly started to outnumber those who spoke the original Sumerian, while others believe it's because Akkadian became the language of business and religion. Either way, Mesopotamia saw the decline of significant cities and city-states like the famous Ur, Uruk, Eridu, and Lagash thanks to the rise of the new Akkadian Empire (2334–2154 BCE), which would replace the Sumerian Empire.

However, this doesn't mean that the Sumerians disappeared. Those people were still around and actually became part of the Akkadian Empire. The only thing that changed was that Akkadian language and culture was starting to become more prominent and widespread, similar to how the ancient Roman Empire became Christian, while the people that constituted Sumer and Mesopotamia remained. Even the major religious center of the original Sumerians remained the same; it was just now referred to as

Akkadian. This would be the city of Nippur, where residents worshiped the god Enlil. This wouldn't change until Hammurabi emerged as the mighty leader of the Babylonians around the 18th century BCE.

**The Sumerians**

The Sumerians are the oldest known Mesopotamian civilization and considered to be the first. They settled the region between 5000 and 4500 BCE. Most historians believe they were a western Asian people who moved farther west for greater access to resources and arable land that developed from the deposits of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. When in Mesopotamia, they divided into militaristic city-states which traded and fought with one another over territory. The cities were separated from one another by canals, rocky outcrops, and raised terrain that served as protection from attacks. Each city possessed a temple dedicated to a patron god or goddess. The government consisted of a series of powerful, land-owning nobles led either by a religious governor, called an *ensi*, or a king, called a *lugal*.[16]

The Sumerian written history can be dated as far back as the 27th century BCE, although most records come from much later during the 23rd century BCE. This is because around that time, the Sumerians developed a new system of writing based on syllables. Contrary to popular belief, this ancient civilization demonstrated some unusual qualities, such as relative gender equality and cities which lacked walls and standing armies. During their early existence, the Sumerians experienced periods of great peace, and royalty and other prominent legislative figures would have both male and female advisors. For the temples, the gender of the high priest would alternate based on the god's form. So, a male god would have a female high priest, and a female god would have a male.

This way of life changed during a span of time called the Early Dynastic Period, which started around 2900 BCE and lasted until c. 2500 BCE. Here, most of the unprotected cities disappeared and society shifted to the governing system mentioned above, where nobles and a high priest or king controlled humans and resources. Women slowly lost their place in society and were confined more and more to a domestic role as agriculture and warfare stripped them of their rights. A great resource for historians about this time period, and one of the oldest pieces of human literature, is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.[17]

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* was written during the Akkadian Empire, but the man himself was one of the kings of Uruk and the most famous Mesopotamian hero. He ruled at some point between 2800 and 2500 BCE and would eventually be deified, or made a god. His epic provides valuable information about Sumerian values and lifestyles, as well as the influence of religion and the gods on society and culture.

There were a few reasons why the Sumerians slowly faded. One was the natural movement of more ethnic groups and different language-speaking tribes into the region. Another was increased soil salinity, or the presence of rising amounts of salt. This salt made it difficult to grow their staple crop, wheat. Even when farmers switched to barley, which should have been able to tolerate the salinity, it was too late. The Sumerians had to move from their homelands, which upset the balance of power and allowed the Akkadians to gain a regional advantage.

**The Akkadians**

Originally, the Akkadians were just another group living in Mesopotamia. After the Sumerians struggled and left their homes, the Akkadians managed to gain significant territorial and cultural footholds. Slowly, they built an empire which united the two peoples and brought Akkadian culture to prominence.[18]

The central city of the Akkadian Empire was Akkad, which historians still struggle to precisely locate. Its first powerful ruler was a man named Sargon. His personal background is unknown as he himself made numerous claims, including having a changeling mother and an absent father. Once he aspired to be king, he changed his story so that his mother was actually a high priestess. This would have meant he was a noble and gave him legitimacy to rule. He began his life as a cupbearer to another king and worked his way to being a gardener who cleaned irrigation canals. Here, he formed his first coalition of soldiers from the other workers.

Sargon displaced the original king and then immediately started to expand the Akkadian territory through conquest. He united all of Mesopotamia and then spread across the Euphrates River into an area known as the Levant. Here, he fought and dominated an ancient people known as the Hattians. He replaced any ruler who opposed him with Akkadian nobles and purportedly ruled for 56 years before dying of old age. He expanded trade considerably

to include materials like silver and lapis, and spread it north into Assyria, which would become the breadbasket of the Akkadians.

After Sargon's death, the Akkadian Empire remained strong and powerful. The civilization and economy were carefully planned to fully maximize the efficiency of resources and the population. Staple foods like wheat, barley, and oil were kept in massive granaries and measured out to citizens. Taxes could be paid in money, food, or public service—in this way, the Akkadians kept their walls and canals strong through labor. The Akkadian language became ubiquitous throughout the Middle East and spread to nearby territories. Tablets containing it have been found as far as Egypt.[19]

By the 22nd century BCE, though, the Akkadian Empire struggled and toppled after lasting only 180 years. Historians propose a diverse array of reasons why this could be as there isn't enough archaeological evidence to indicate a precise cause. The first idea is that there was a massive drought which decimated the empire's agriculture, making their way of life unsustainable. The second is that the empire simply extended itself too far and found itself unable to maintain control over city-states that fought for independence. The third is that nomadic hordes descended upon Mesopotamia and the Akkadian military was not strong enough to stop them. This last theory seems the least likely as the Akkadians held strict control over their immediate territory and there is the least amount of evidence for the nomad hypothesis.

Descendants and successors of the Akkadians possessed their own ideas. According to one preserved tablet, the fall of the empire came about due to the sacrilegious actions of King Naram-Sin, who listened to two lying oracles and sacked a temple protected by the chief god Enlil. As punishment, eight of the gods gathered together and cast down judgment upon the empire. The text reads:

For the first time since cities were built and founded,

The great agricultural tracts produced no grain,

The inundated tracts produced no fish,

The irrigated orchards produced neither syrup nor wine,

The gathered clouds did not rain, the masgurum did not grow.

At that time, one shekel's worth of oil was only one-half quart,

One shekel's worth of grain was only one-half quart…

These sold at such prices in the markets of all the cities!"

He who slept on the roof, died on the roof,
He who slept in the house, had no burial,
People were flailing at themselves from hunger.[20]
As the Akkadian star waned, the Babylonian star rose and would create one of the longest-lasting empires in history.

# Chapter 5 – The Amorite Dynasty or the First Babylonians

There is little archaeological evidence to indicate when the First Babylonian Dynasty developed since the region possesses a high water table that led to the destruction of old clay materials. The evidence which survives to this day tends to be royal documentation, some literature, and lists of years and their corresponding names. For these reasons, not much is known about the culture and society of the First Babylonians, although historians can clearly trace significant political and cultural events.

## The Origins of the Amorite Dynasty

The First Babylonian Dynasty was the Amorite Dynasty, which lasted from 1894-1595 BCE. The Amorites were a semi-nomadic people who lived in Mesopotamia and adopted the Akkadian language while the old Akkadian Empire was still in power. Once the large-scale drought struck the region in the 22nd BCE, the Amorites moved from their lands west of the Euphrates in great numbers and crossed over into more Akkadian territory, where their lifestyle was better suited to the minimal agriculture able to be performed in that region. As the Akkadians and the Assyrians, who still existed in northern Mesopotamia, concentrated on keeping territory close to home, they abandoned the lower section of Mesopotamia. Into this power vacuum came the Amorites, who formed several city-states and small kingdoms.[21]

One of these kingdoms was the small Kazallu, which featured the town of Babylon. Around 1894 BCE, Kazallu started to gain resources and military power. From there, it would gradually conquer the other Amorite kingdoms and unite them to form the first iteration of the Babylonian Empire known as the First Babylonian Dynasty. This dynasty began when a chieftain called Sumu-Abum took the land containing Babylon from Kazallu and attempted to transform it into a minor state. Unfortunately for him, there was a deluge of minor states crammed within the Amorite territory, and he never received recognition or the title of *King of Babylon*. It would seem that the small town simply was not worthy of possessing its own kingship while competing with the others in the area.

Sumu-Abum was succeeded by numerous successors who were additionally unable to acquire the legitimacy of a kingship, not that any of them tried. These three men were Sumu-la-El, Sabium, and Apil-Sin. The next to rule, Sin-Muballit, would be the first Amorite ruler to claim the title *King of Babylon*, but it would seem his regality was only on paper—or clay, as the case may be. The official title only appeared a single time in existing tablets, indicating it was not used frequently. It's unclear whether the town of Babylon remained insignificant due to a lack of ambition or ability on the part of the early Babylonian rulers, or simple overshadowing. After all, Babylon existed in the same region of much older, grander, and more powerful kingdoms like Assyria, Elam, and Larsa.

**Hammurabi**

Soon, though, Babylon would become grand with the reign of its sixth ruler, the legendary and eminent Hammurabi.

Hammurabi, also referred to as Hammurapi in some ancient texts, lived from c.1810-c.1750 BCE and reigned from 1792-1750 BCE. He came to power at the tender age of eighteen following the abdication of his father, who was ill and feared his death approached. Hammurabi is simultaneously remembered as a dynamic, efficient conqueror and the creator of one of the oldest and most detailed law codes of the ancient world, which was inscribed on a massive black stele. During his reign, he experienced immense success and conquered many of the other kingdoms of Mesopotamia and the surrounding area, including the tough Elam, Larsa, Mari, and Eshnunna.[22]

Upon ascending to the throne, Hammurabi's first actions were to improve the structure of Babylon, reform the army, and establish a bureaucracy with clear policies for taxation to bolster military and royal spending. The government relied less on the power of additional nobles and became more centralized, with a system of scribes and administrators who could carry out official business with minimum disruptions. Hammurabi and his generals disciplined the army and ensured it was equipped with the best equipment available, which meant improved bronze weapons, leather armor and boots, shields, helmets, and chariots.

Hammurabi received some help in this regard. Before leaving the throne, Sin-Muballit, Hammurabi's father, had begun a system of expansion into the neighboring kingdoms and attempted to assert Babylonian hegemony

throughout southern Mesopotamia. His dreams were thwarted, however, by the presence of dominant kingdoms to the north. Hammurabi, therefore, came to power in a precarious and complex geopolitical situation. Elam to the east frequently attempted to exact tribute from the minor southern Mesopotamian kingdoms like Babylon, and the Assyrians to the north controlled the largest extent of territory and possessed a well-developed and expansive culture. One of Hammurabi's strokes of luck would be the sudden death of the Assyrian king, which left the territory in poorly protected fragments.[23]

But for the first few decades of his reign, Hammurabi had little to do with the affairs of other states. Instead, he focused on building his own kingdom. It wasn't until Elam launched an invasion of southern Mesopotamia and destroyed the kingdom of Eshnunna that Babylon responded to external stimuli. After taking Eshnunna, the king of Elam wished to consolidate his power. To do so, he attempted to start a war between Babylon and Larsa. Upon discovering the duplicity, Hammurabi struck a deal with the ruler of Larsa, turned around, and crushed the Elamites. The Babylonians contributed the majority of the military might.

Hammurabi next began a protracted war with the Assyrian Empire to the north where most of his troops were concentrated. He sought to control Mesopotamia and gain some form of dominance in the region, especially since Assyria ruled over the Hurrians and Hattians, the northeast Levant, and central Mesopotamia. Taking the territory would contribute to the resources of Babylon as well as provide access to arable agricultural land and new trade routes. Hammurabi would struggle for decades with two separate kings: Shamshi-Adad I and Ishme-Dagan, named after an influential deity.[24] Eventually, Babylon gained the upper hand, and the new king of Assyria, Mut-Askur, was forced to pay tribute to Babylon by handing over Assyria's colonies near Anatolia. The below map shows Assyria's location in respect to Babylon, which occupied parts of the Akkadian and Sumerian territories.

While asserting dominance over the Assyrians, Hammurabi completed his famous law code, which drew heavily from previous sources created in Sumer, Akkad, and Assyria itself. Its creation began shortly after the expulsion of the Elamites and would take several years to complete. The Code of Hammurabi contains roughly 282 laws dictating the proper punishments and courses of action for a variety of crimes, including murder, theft, adultery, and improper medical practices. Punishments were harsh and draconian, frequently involving mutilation or death for the guilty party. Accusing someone of a crime of which they were innocent resulted in the death of the accuser. Some memorable laws include:

2 – "If any one bring an accusation against a man, and the accused go to the river and leap into the river, if he sink in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river prove that the accused is not guilty, and he escape unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser."

25 – "If fire break out in a house, and someone who comes to put it out cast his eye upon the property of the owner of the house, and take the property

of the master of the house, he shall be thrown into that self-same fire."

130 – "If a man violate the wife (betrothed or child-wife) of another man, who has never known a man, and still lives in her father's house, and sleep with her and be surprised, this man shall be put to death, but the wife is blameless."

141 – "If a man's wife, who lives in his house, wishes to leave it, plunges into debt, tries to ruin her house, neglects her husband, and is judicially convicted: if her husband offer her release, she may go on her way, and he gives her nothing as a gift of release. If her husband does not wish to release her, and if he take another wife, she shall remain as servant in her husband's house."

195 – "If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off."

196 – "If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out."[25]

**Cultural Changes and Decline**

The rise of the Babylonians resulted in major cultural shifts. One of the most significant was the transition of major cities. Before Hammurabi, the most important Mesopotamian city was Nippur, where the patron god was Enlil, the chief deity in the pantheon. With Hammurabi, the focus was shifted to the city of Babylon and the new chief deity was Marduk, who originated in southern Mesopotamia. The only exception to this rule was in certain segments of the old Assyria, where Ashur and Ishtar remained more influential. Literacy additionally improved among the upper classes, and the number of scribes increased. The size and population of Babylon and southern Mesopotamia in general exploded, and numerous palaces, temples, and bas-reliefs were created to display the area's newfound prominence.

Following Hammurabi's death, the situation deteriorated rapidly. The problem with southern Mesopotamia was that there were no geographic boundaries that provided significant protection from invaders. Hammurabi was replaced by a relatively ineffectual leader, one Samsu-iluna, who lost the tip of southern Mesopotamia to an Akkadian-speaking king. This territory would not be reunited with the rest of Babylon for 272 years and became the Sealand Dynasty. Next, the Assyrians to the north pushed back against the Babylonians and reclaimed territory after six years of warfare. Although several rulers fought to regain the Sealand Dynasty and sections of Assyria, they failed. Two more kings focused on building projects instead.

The final Amorite ruler of Babylon would be Samsu-Ditana, who struggled against the Kassites.[26] The Kassites were an unusual group which spoke an isolated language and hailed from contemporary northwest Iran. They chipped away at Babylonian power and were then followed by the Hittites around 1595 BCE. These Hittites sacked Babylon and left the region, leaving a destroyed city ripe for the taking by the Kassites. Historians are unsure of the exact year of the sack of Babylon but give three dates: 1499 BCE, 1531 BCE, and 1595 BCE.

# Chapter 6 – The First Fall of Babylon and the Rise of the Kassites

Gandash of Mari founded the Kassite Dynasty in Mesopotamia and potentially led the invasion of Babylon, although sources are unclear. Similar to the Amorites, the Kassites were not native to Mesopotamia and instead migrated from the Zagros mountain range in northwestern Iran. There doesn't remain any genetic evidence for scientists to figure out the exact ethnic affiliation of the Kassites, but they did not belong to the same general language group of the Babylonians or any of the other civilizations in Mesopotamia or the nearby Levant. It's entirely possible the Kassites were an isolated people, although some suspect they were actually Indo-European and speaking a dialect which had morphed from little interaction with others.[27]

The Kassites would possess the longest dynasty to ever exist in Babylonia. They renamed the city Karduniaš and made several changes to the general role of the monarchy. Previously, the king was seen as a divine figure and could be deified. None of the Kassite rulers ever included any divine attributes in their personal descriptions and separated themselves from the general idea that to be king was a holy office. None of them ever added the word for "god" to their names either, which had been a common practice throughout Mesopotamia. Despite these changes though, Babylon would remain one of the holiest cities of the region and the priests of the Mesopotamian religion retained their power. The pantheon stayed relatively unchanged.

Indeed, the Kassites changed little. Their only major contributions were the incorporation of the Kassite language, although many switched to Akkadian; the retention of a tribal structure rather than small family units; and the artistic addition of special carved stones called kudurrus, which were used as boundary markers throughout the empire.

The Kassites proved to be weak monarchs. Although they managed to push into Babylonian territory, they didn't make it farther for over a century. Instead, the kings focused for a long time on maintaining peaceful relations with their neighbors. After Gandash of Mari came Agum II, who ascended to the throne in 1595 BCE. His territory extended southward from the

midpoint of the Euphrates River to modern-day Iran, and Agum II realized it would be difficult to manage such a large swathe of land if he went to war with his neighbors. Instead, he maintained peaceful relationships with the closest powers, including the king of Assyria to the north. The only people he fought were the Hittites, who still wanted to claim some Babylonian territory after sacking the city. During his reign, he proclaimed that Marduk, Babylon's patron deity, was equal to the Kassite Shuqamuna.[28]

Agum II's successors likewise kept to themselves and focused on making Babylon a cohesive territorial state rather than a series of powerful cities. While frequently overshadowed by larger neighbors like Elam and Assyria, Babylon established significant trade routes and conducted successful diplomacy through marriage treaties with Assyria. Foreign merchants and traders flocked to Babylon to exchange goods, and the Kassites started sending their own merchants and traders as far as Egypt to acquire luxuries like Nubian gold. After building the state into a stable empire, the Kassites started to push southward to reclaim the tip of Mesopotamia claimed by the Sealand Dynasty. They would succeed and welcome it back into the empire.

To maintain control over their territory, the Kassites divided the empire into smaller provinces overseen by an influential governor loyal to the crown. They also established two royal cities, keeping Babylon as one and designating Dur-Kurigalzu as the other. Provincial centers became major trade centers and sources of culture even though the Kassites themselves failed to spread literacy and literature during their reign. Temples and important buildings were torn down or meticulously updated and rebuilt to further cement the significance of the cities.

Everything seemed to go well for the Kassites until relations with Assyria deteriorated. In the mid-15$^{th}$ century BCE, Kurigalzu I and Ashur-bel-nisheshu signed a treaty to facilitate peace and trade, but the next few centuries were spent struggling for dominion in Mesopotamia. Problems escalated when Ashur-uballit I ascended to the Assyrian throne in 1365 BCE and solicited aid from the Hittites and Egyptians to become the greatest power in the region. Ashur-uballit I sacked Babylon after his daughter's husband, the king of the Kassites, was found murdered. To avenge his son-in-law, he deposed the new monarch and chose a new ruler from the Kassite line.

Further attacks would come from the following rulers of Assyria for various reasons. Some, like Enlil-nirari (1330-1319 BCE) sought to expand into

Babylonian territory and succeeded in annexing chunks to assimilate into the Assyrian Empire. Others desired full conquest, and Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244-1208 BCE) even succeeded and ruled the entirety of Babylon for eight years from the city itself. He would be the first king of Babylon to be ethnically Mesopotamian, as the Amorites and Kassites were all outsiders.

Eventually, an Assyrian governor took over the throne for the monarchy, and the royal generals were able to return to the main section of Assyria rather than remain and rule. A string of governors would rule for Babylonia in their stead until Adad-shuma-usur (1216-1189 BCE) decided late in his reign to separate from Assyria and once again attempt to form an independent Babylonian empire. He struggled with the king, Enlil-kudurri-usur, until his death, and a civil war continued afterward. Slowly, Babylonia shrugged off the shackles of Assyria, and the Kassites formed a semi-independent empire once more.[29]

Meli-Shipak II followed and held a peaceful reign by losing no territory and not suffering from the Late Bronze Age collapse that decimated the powers in the Levant, the kingdom of Canaan, and the Egyptian Empire to the west. The next two kings were not as lucky and experienced protracted warfare with the Assyrians, who resumed their expansionist policies and attempted to take northern Babylonia between 1171 and 1155 BCE. Then Elam attacked, taking most of eastern Babylonia and incorporating it into their kingdom. In 1155 BCE, the Kassite Dynasty fell once the Assyrians and Elamites succeeded in tearing apart Babylon, sacking the city, and murdering the final Kassite king.

**Dynasty IV of Babylonia**

The next ruler of Babylonia would then be the Elamites. They did not keep the territory long as their expansionist tendencies brought them head to head with the equally voracious Assyrians, who wished to claim the entirety of Mesopotamia for themselves. Elam and Assyria entered a brutal war which resulted in an Elamite loss, an Assyrian victory, and the creation of a new Mesopotamian dynasty in Babylon. The first ruler would be Marduk-kabit-ahheshu, who ruled from 1155-1139 BCE. He was the second native Mesopotamian to hold the throne and would establish Dynasty IV of Babylon, which lasted 125 years. Although hailing from Assyria, Marduk-kabit-ahheshu eventually warred with the Assyrian monarchy over border territory. Although he captured the southern city of Ekallatum, he lost it and would be defeated by King Ashur-Dan I.

The next two kings also tried to conquer sections of Assyria but failed and were forced to sign unfavorable treaties that cost Babylon land and resources. Then, another successful monarch came, one who is well-known to contemporary audiences: Nebuchadnezzar I (1124-1103 BCE).

Nebuchadnezzar I was the most successful ruler of Dynasty IV. Unlike his predecessors, he possessed advanced knowledge of military strategy and conquest and succeeded in defeating the Elamites and driving them out of Babylon. He went so far as to follow the soldiers into Elam itself, captured the capital of Susa, and returned several sacred Babylonian artifacts stolen during previous conquests to Babylon. Elam would then disintegrate after the assassination of its king, fully eliminating the state as a threat during Nebuchadnezzar I's life.

Afterward, Nebuchadnezzar I attempted to expand into Assyrian territory, namely the regions of Aram and Anatolia. However, he was unsuccessful and chose to instead devote his time to once against bolstering and beautifying Babylon in his old age. While doing this, he shored up the empire's defenses, especially against the Assyrians and Arameans, which were another group slowly rising on the corpses of their neighbors. After he died, his two sons messed up his successes. The first lost small sections of Babylonian territory to Assyria, but the second truly failed by declaring a full war and losing catastrophically to the king of the time, one Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1076 BCE).[30]

Tiglath-Pileser I annexed massive swathes of land, expanding his own empire while significantly weakening the Babylonians. Then, famine struck. The population of Babylon starved, and the military became weakened from a lack of food and resources. Like vultures preying on a dying animal, the peoples of the Levant swooped down upon Babylon and attempted to pick the territory clean of any remaining valuables and resources. The kings were powerless to stop the onslaught from the Semitic Aramaeans and Suteans from the Levant. At the same time, relations with Assyria soured further to the point where Assyria invaded, deposed the king, and made Babylon a vassal. It wasn't until the Middle Assyrian Empire descended into a costly civil war that the Babylonians were able to escape vassalage and regain independence once more.

In true fashion, they were not left alone. From the west came new groups of Semitic-speaking peoples who sought to migrate from the Levant following the havoc and chaos caused by the Bronze Age collapse, or the breakdown

of civilization due to a combination of environmental and military factors. These peoples tended to be Arameans and Suteans, who took over huge sections of the Babylonian countryside and refused to leave.

**A Century of Chaos, 1026–911 BC**E

Aramean marauders managed to depose the ruling Babylonian dynasty around 1026 BCE, which plunged the capital city into chaos. Anarchy ruled for twenty years, during which time there was no monarch on the throne. Eventually, a new dynasty developed in southern Mesopotamia, around the location of the old Sealand Dynasty, which had been incorporated into Babylon once more by the Kassites. This new dynasty, referred to as Dynasty V, only lasted from 1025-1004 BCE but managed to eliminate some of the chaos in the empire. Babylon still ended up losing northern territory to the Assyrians, including the city of Atila.

Several more short dynasties would follow, one ruled by the Kassites and another by the leftover Amorites. They fell quickly, and the Arameans once again savaged the countryside and raised anarchy in the cities. Again, two short dynasties appeared, bringing Babylon up to Dynasty IX with King Ninurta-kudurri-usur II. Although weak and struck with hordes of Arameans and Suteans, Babylon once again had someone seated squarely on the throne. Even more territory wound up in the hands of the Assyrians and Elamites.

# Chapter 7 – Assyrian Domination and Rule, 911-619 BCE

Babylonia suffered throughout the remainder of the 10th century BCE as chaos was the name of the game. The government could not reorganize, and resources became scarce. Further migrations of nomads made it difficult for the population to sustain itself. Some of the new arrivals were the Chaldeans, who entered in the southeast and set up permanent settlements. This group was another Semitic-language speaking culture that added and contributed heavily to the overall Babylonian society. By 850 BCE, the Chaldeans established their own land in Babylonian territory and started to send their culture north through natural migration, trade, and human interaction.

Aside from roaming migratory groups, Babylonia faced additional struggles through the formation of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 911 BCE. The Neo-Assyrian Empire was not only the largest Mesopotamian empire to date but also the most massive in the history of the world. It would conquer much of the known world in Mesopotamia, the Levant, and other sections of northeastern Africa and western Asia. Among its territories were Babylonia itself, Persia, Israel, Judah, sections of Egypt, and the burgeoning Arabia states. This map demonstrates its extent:

*The Neo-Assyrian Empire*

The empire's founder was a man named Adad-nirari II. He entered Babylonia and conquered huge sections of it, eventually forcing the entire region under its control. He started by attacking and defeating one of Babylonia's leaders, Shamash-mudammiq, and took land north of the Diyala River and several important towns around the middle of Mesopotamia. He continued his push forward when a new leader took control, this time Nabu-shuma-ukin I. The successors of Shamash-mudammiq, Tukulti-Ninurta II and Ashurnasirpal II, consolidated their hold over Babylonia and officially forced it to become a vassal of the much greater Neo-Assyrian Empire. This meant it now needed to pay tribute and essentially give up military or economic resources as the Assyrians demanded.

After Ashurnasirpal II, the next Assyrian leader—Shalmaneser III—managed to sack the city of Babylon, kill the Babylonian king, and take control of the invasive migratory tribes that dominated southern Babylonia, including the Chaldeans. The rulers of Babylonia would remain vassals until 780 BCE. Then, the foreign Marduk-apla-usur took advantage of a civil war in Assyria and ascended to the Babylonian throne. He was a

Chaldean and quickly drew the ire of the Assyrian rulers, who were not happy with his usurpation. The Assyrian king came down, retook northern Babylonia, and then made Marduk-apla-usur sign a new border treaty that gave Assyria more territory. However, Marduk-apla-usur was allowed to remain on the throne and ruled until 769 BCE. Another Chaldean took the throne, and then another.[31]

Another Babylonian would not retake the throne until 748 BCE, when Nabonassar overthrew the Chaldeans, stabilized Babylonia under his rule, and retained good relations with Assyria. He kept the peace for three years until a new Assyrian king came to power and once again tried to conquer Babylonia. This leader, Tiglath-Pileser III, sacked Babylon—again—and remade Babylonia into a vassal state. This situation continued until 729 BCE when the Assyrian royal line decided to just incorporate Babylonia into its empire instead of relying on the vassalage of Babylonian kings, who were clearly untrustworthy and bad at their jobs.

Around this time, Babylonian Akkadian stopped being the main language as the Assyrians started to insert their own language. This was Eastern Aramaic, which possessed a couple of linguistic differences. Assyrian culture additionally weaved its way throughout Mesopotamia, displacing many original practices. These changes would continue even as revolts started to form throughout former Babylonia.

A Chaldean chieftain south of Babylon by the name of Marduk-apla-iddina II fomented unrest and revolt, and gained immense support not only from other Chaldeans but from the Elamites to the east. This new power-hungry individual managed to gain the throne in Babylon and ruled between 721 and 710 BCE. The main reason for his success was that the Assyrian king, Sargon II, was busy attempting to put down two groups known as the Cimmerians and the Scythians, who had attacked Assyrian vassals outside of Mesopotamia. When the king is away, it’s time for the usurpers to play, after all.

Unfortunately for this usurper, the king came back. Sargon II defeated Marduk-apla-iddina II and threw him out of the palace. Marduk-apla-iddina II fled to Elam, where he lived with some of his former allies and protectors. Sargon II became the new king of Babylon.[32]

Sargon II remained a successful and efficient ruler until he was killed in battle around 705 BCE. His soldiers were unable to recover his body, and

authority and the throne went to his son, Sennacherib. After a few years of direct ruling, Sennacherib decided to pass the Babylonian throne to his own son so he could focus more on conquest and the rest of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Strife and warfare soon came to Babylon again as the Elamites tried to take the territory once more. One Elamite, Nergal-ushezib, killed the Assyrian prince in Babylon and gained power, which led to Sennacherib returning, beating back Elam, and sacking the city of Babylon once again, effectively destroying the city. The population was no doubt thrilled to be sacked yet another time, but no sources remain to give a commoner's perspective on the constant political turmoil and warfare.

This could have been the end, but in true historical fashion, it was not. Sennacherib's other sons chose to murder their father while he was praying at a temple in Nineveh in 681 BCE, leaving a power vacuum. The new Assyrian king placed a puppet leader on the Babylonian throne when who should return but Marduk-apla-iddina II. He deposed the puppet king and took power once more, only to be thoroughly thrashed by Esarhaddon. Marduk-apla-iddina II once more fled to Elam with his tail between his legs, where he would eventually die as an exile.

The Assyrian king Esarhaddon was potentially the best thing to happen to the city of Babylon around this time. After defeating Marduk-apla-iddina II, he returned to Babylon and ruled it personally, choosing to rebuild the city and focus on peace instead of expansion. Upon his death, he kept the Neo-Assyrian Empire together but requested that his eldest son rule in Babylon and his youngest son, the famous Ashurbanipal, rule as the more influential king of Assyria.[33]

Anyone who knows anything about brothers will see how this decision fared. The oldest son, Shamash-shum-ukin, spent decades as the subject of Ashurbanipal and finally got fed up with the situation. He publicly declared that Babylon, not Nineveh, should be the capital of the empire, developed a military, and set out to revolt against Ashurbanipal. He combined the forces of almost everyone who resented Assyrian rule and subjugation, including the Babylonians themselves, the Persians, Elamites, Chaldeans, Medes, the Arameans, and others. Unfortunately for Shamash-shum-ukin, Ashurbanipal was both a scholar and a skilled strategist. He thoroughly routed and decimated his brother's forces, sacking Babylon once again, destroying Elam, and subjugating all of the peoples who opposed him through violence, brutality, and savagery. Lucky for Shamash-shum-ukin,

the older brother died in battle and did not live to see his little brother's wrath. A new governor named Kandalanu was given Babylon to rule.

Was it time for peace now? No.

Like all mortals, Ashurbanipal died. His son, Ashur-etil-ilani, took the throne following Ashurbanipal's passing in 627 BCE and tried to be a successful ruler, but the Neo-Assyrian Empire became the scene of convoluted and savage civil wars as Ashurbanipal's generals and other nobles tried to wrest power from the young king. Some historians believe these battles were exacerbated by poor environmental conditions that resulted in a severe drought and limited resources.[34] Ashur-etil-ilani was betrayed by his own military commander, who was ousted after only a year by another man. This one, Sinsharishkun, ruled between 622 and 612 BCE before succumbing to the ravages of ongoing civil conflict.

During all of this turmoil, Babylonia took the opportunity to free itself. A Chaldean called Nabopolassar organized a large-scale rebellion and revolt, eventually liberating the region and ending the centuries of tribute and vassalage that characterized Babylonia under the Assyrians.

# Chapter 8 – The Neo-Babylonian Empire

Babylonia's Assyrian problems weren't over, but the time of Assyrian control had come to an end. Soon, the Neo-Assyrian Empire would be replaced with the Neo-Babylonian as the Babylonians discovered their new position of power over Mesopotamia. The journey to a new empire began with the Chaldean Nabopolassar, who set the stage for an independent Babylonian state.[35] He would be the founder of a new dynasty called Dynasty XI, which would survive until roughly 539 BCE. It consisted of six rulers:

- Nabopolassar from 626-605 BCE
- Nabu-kudurri-usur II (Nebuchadnezzar II) from 605-562 BCE
- Amel-Marduk from 562-560 BCE
- Neriglissar from 560-556 BCE
- Labasi-Marduk in 556 BCE only
- Nabonidus from 556-539 BCE

These kings would control the Neo-Babylonian Empire for almost a century. Without their work, Babylonia would have been unable to escape further domination by outside forces, especially as more and more ethnic groups and tribes struggled to control the same amount of territory. The Neo-Babylonian Empire represented a unique golden age for Babylonia before it finally descended once more into vassalage and obscurity from the sheer pressure of all of these outside forces, as well as from the rise of a new threat.

But before the shadow of a rival empire arrived, the story began with Nabopolassar.

**Nabopolassar**

Nabopolassar managed to sit on the throne in Babylon undisturbed for three years while bloody civil wars raged in Assyria. Eventually, though, a claimant to the throne consolidated his power and set his sights once more on southern Mesopotamia. This would be Sin-shar-ishkun, who had murdered his brother in battle, seized the Assyrian throne, and focused on the conquest of Babylonia once more. Nabopolassar was not an unseasoned warrior and had been expecting Assyrian resistance to Babylonian

independence. Although Assyrian forces camped along the borders of Babylonia for seven years, Nabopolassar resisted invasion. He admittedly was aided by the fact that the Assyrian civil wars raged on, frequently distracting his enemy.

Nabopolassar additionally made headway into Assyria itself, capturing the influential city of Nippur in 619 BCE. Nippur was a part of Babylonia but had been one of the centers of pro-Assyrian sentiment, meaning its conquest was a significant political maneuver for the would-be king of a new Babylonia. Nabopolassar continued to consolidate his hold of southern Mesopotamia and watched as the other Assyrian colonies slowly started to free themselves from vassalage and servitude.

*The Ruins of Nippur in Modern Iraq*

Around 616 BCE, Nabopolassar tried to take territory from the remnants of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. He besieged the cities of Arrapha and Assur, but Sin-shar-ishkun expected the attack and forced the Babylonians back to their own lands. Here, the two forces stayed at an impasse. Neither Assyria nor Babylonia possessed any power to eliminate the other, forcing them to become disgruntled neighbors.

The impasse ended when a former vassal of the Assyrians, a leader named Cyaxares, attacked Sin-shar-ishkun. Cyaxares ruled over several different Iranian ethnic groups such as the Parthians, Medes, and Persians. He

attacked in 615 BCE, sacked Arrapha, destroyed Kalhu—also called Nimrud in contemporary sources—and then formed an alliance with the Cimmerians and Scythians. Together, the three forces besieged and conquered Assur. Nabopolassar and the Babylonians were uninvolved but still benefited greatly from the destruction of Assyrian power. Nabopolassar chose to form alliances with these new powers, signing treaties with the Medes, Scythians, Persians, Cimmerians, and other Iranian peoples.

Around 613 BCE, the Assyrians rallied themselves and managed to repel the concerted efforts of the Babylonians and their new allies. This led to Nabopolassar combining his forces with Cyaxares to create one large army consisting of over six different cultural tribes/groups. Together, the sextuplet converged on the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. The sheer size of the army proved to be too gargantuan for the weakened Assyrians to handle, and the city walls crumbled following a three-month siege. Then, the fighting continued on a smaller scale, with forces fighting house by house within the massive city. Soon, Sin-shar-ishkun died defending the city.[36]

Sources get a bit murky about what happened next. A series of tablets known as the Babylonian Chronicles indicate that an Assyrian general briefly became king and was offered the chance to become a vassal to the coalition besieging Nineveh. By all accounts, the general refused, fought his way out of the city, and created a new capital in the city of Harran. Here, he managed to maintain a base of power for five years before Harran was lost in 608 BCE. With the majority of the Assyrian forces destroyed, it was time to turn Babylonian attention to the Egyptians.

Pharaoh Necho II became involved in the war in Mesopotamia around 609 BCE. The Egyptians were one of the vassals of Assyria and attempted to aid their former commanders, but found themselves slowly outnumbered even though they brought Greek mercenaries and were joined by what remained of the Assyrian military. Babylonia, still led by Nabopolassar, spent years trying to drive the Egyptians back, aided by their new allies from Syria, Israel, and a few places in Arabia and Asia Minor. Aiding Nabopolassar was his son, Nebuchadnezzar II (Nabu-kudurri-usur II), who was one of the best military commanders seen in Babylonia in years.

The war between the former Assyrian vassals and Egyptians culminated in the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE. There aren’t good records of this battle as the most complete source of information comes from a tablet known as the Nebuchadnezzar Chronicle, which naturally praises the

Babylonian commander and claims he had a decisive victory. Historians do know that the former Assyrian vassals went into battle with 18,000 total troops while the Egyptians had 40,000. Through superior military strategy and taking advantage of natural resources, Nebuchadnezzar II routed the Egyptian army, inflicting maximum damages while taking minimal losses.

**Nebuchadnezzar II**

The Neo-Assyrian domination was no more. Northern Mesopotamia largely went to the Medes, while the Babylonians focused on rebuilding their territory in the south. Nabopolassar died in 605 BCE, and Nebuchadnezzar II became king in his stead. Nebuchadnezzar II experienced one of the longest reigns of any Babylonian king and became well known for his building projects throughout the empire. He rebuilt all of the empire's ruined, sacked, and destroyed cities, redesigning them and constructing on a truly extravagant scale with new walls, temples, and works of art.[37]

Babylon became a city of legend—beautiful, immense, spectacular, and characterized by unusual and delightful architecture. Babylon stretched over three square miles in length, which was no easy feat during the Iron Age. Nebuchadnezzar II gave it double walls to keep out invaders—potentially because of all of the sacking—and built deep moats for added protection. The Euphrates River appears to have gone through the center of the city, providing aesthetic beauty but also the practicalities of a nearby trade route and fresh water. In the center of the center, he placed a ziggurat known as Etemenanki near the Temple of Marduk, the city's patron god. Historians believe that Etemenanki was the inspiration for the Tower of Babel of legend.

*The Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563*

The ruins of the Babylon that Nebuchadnezzar II built remain the single largest archaeological site in the Middle East. They spread out over 2,000 acres of land and include great remains such as the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way. The Ishtar Gate was an extremely lavish entryway into the city of Babylon and was built as the eighth gate into the inner city. It was dedicated to the goddess Ishtar.

Aside from being focused on domestic development, Nebuchadnezzar II continued his work as a successful military commander. He invaded Syria and Phoenicia and forced several major cities and territories to become Babylonian vassals, including Tyre and Damascus. He also went to Asia Minor and started to build up colonies there to receive a steady supply of tribute and resources. The Neo-Babylonian Empire became like the Neo-Assyrians, forced to campaign every year just to maintain its territory. If Nebuchadnezzar II did not, the vassals would revolt.[38]

Around 601 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar II once again butted heads with the Egyptians and then moved on to conquer parts of Arabia and then captured

Jerusalem in 597. However, the Egyptians soon marched in during an attempt to regain control in the Near East. The Babylonians briefly became occupied with trying to fend off the hordes of the latest pharaoh, and Judah took the opportunity to revolt and try to reestablish its independence. Nebuchadnezzar II came right back, captured Jerusalem in 587 BCE, destroyed the famous Solomon's Temple, deported thousands of Jewish people to Babylon, and burned the city to the ground. Even though he had good qualities, Nebuchadnezzar II was nothing if not brutal to his enemies.

A decade before his death, Nebuchadnezzar II had extended the Neo-Babylonian Empire to its greatest extent. Territory covered not only Babylonia, but also Assyria, Israel, northern Arabia, a good chunk of Asia Minor, Phoenicia, and Philistia. He even invaded Egypt in 568 BCE but was not successful.

**The Other Four Kings of Dynasty XI**

The remaining four rulers of the Neo-Babylonian Empire were not as successful as the first two. When Nebuchadnezzar II perished in 562 BCE, he was replaced by his son, Amel-Marduk. He did not rule long as his brother-in-law, Neriglissar, appears to have murdered him and taken his place in 560 BCE. Why? Some think that Amel-Marduk was ineffective and attempted to remove his father's policies concerning territories and vassal states, which didn't go over well. By all accounts, Neriglissar was a reasonable and stable ruler who continued the trend of public works during the brief four years he was in power. He set about restoring some of the older temples and successfully defeated the powers of Cilicia in Asia Minor.[39]

Neriglissar died young in 556 BCE, and power passed to his son, who was only a child. It took nine months for a conspiracy emerged to murder the boy, Labashi-Marduk. The conspirators then named a man called Nabonidus as the new king. He would be the last ruler, and most believe he was not an ethnic Babylonian or Chaldean but actually an Assyrian from Harran. He even described himself as coming from unimportant and insignificant stock, although his mother appeared to have been a priestess or servant at the temple of a moon god while his father was a commoner.

Although Nabonidus was a great soldier, he had no sense when it came to administration and frequently left his son in charge of the kingdom. To make matters worse, he became hated because he tried to suppress the

worship of Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, and instead wanted to elevate the worshipers of Sin, the Assyrian moon god. Nabonidus' end would come at the hands of the Persians, who were growing in strength in the east and forming a powerful empire under Cyrus the Great, who had numerous supporters in Babylon itself.

# Chapter 9 – The Persian Conquest and Hellenistic Period

Babylonia might not have fallen if Nabonidus had been a better ruler, but the odds were stacked against him. The population repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction with his new social and cultural policies, but he didn't listen. He continued to elevate the status of the cult of Sin while pushing back Marduk. When he did decide to focus on Marduk instead, he attempted to centralize worship at the temple in Babylon itself, which alienated the local priesthoods that dotted the landscape of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Nabonidus' own military hated him as well because he spent his time focusing on rebuilding the towns, unearthing old excavation records, and generally acting like a modern historian or archaeologist rather than as a warrior king.[40]

Nabonidus attempted to pacify the military by placing the defense of the empire in the hands of one of his favorite soldiers, Belshazzar. Although Belshazzar was an exceptional soldier, he was a terrible diplomat that managed to make the Babylonian elites hate him in record time. In particular, Belshazzar seemed to have concentrated military forces in Assyria rather than in southern Mesopotamia, which would leave Babylon open to attack and keep the military away from home for long periods of time without conquest. The fact that both men were also Assyrian rather than Babylonian or Chaldean further incensed the nobility.

### The Rise of Cyrus the Great

The Neo-Babylonian Empire's greatest enemy would appear in the form of Cyrus the Great.[41] Around 550 BCE, he was the Achaemenid Persian king of a city in Elam who led a revolt against his superior, Astyages. Astyages was the king of Medes who kept the Median Empire together to the east of Babylonia. The Median Empire was the term for the civilization created by the Medes, whom readers will recognize as one of the Babylonian allies against Assyria. They dominated the other native Iranian peoples that lived in the region of modern-day Iran. Cyrus the Great convinced the army of Astyages to betray him, and Cyrus then established himself as a new powerful leader in Ecbatana. His revolt ended the Median Empire and pushed the Persians to the top of the hierarchy of the numerous Iranian

peoples living in the region. Within three years, Cyrus was the king of Persia proper, crushing Assyrian revolts and making preparations to enter the Neo-Babylonian Empire for conquest.

*The Four-Winged Representation of Cyrus the Great*

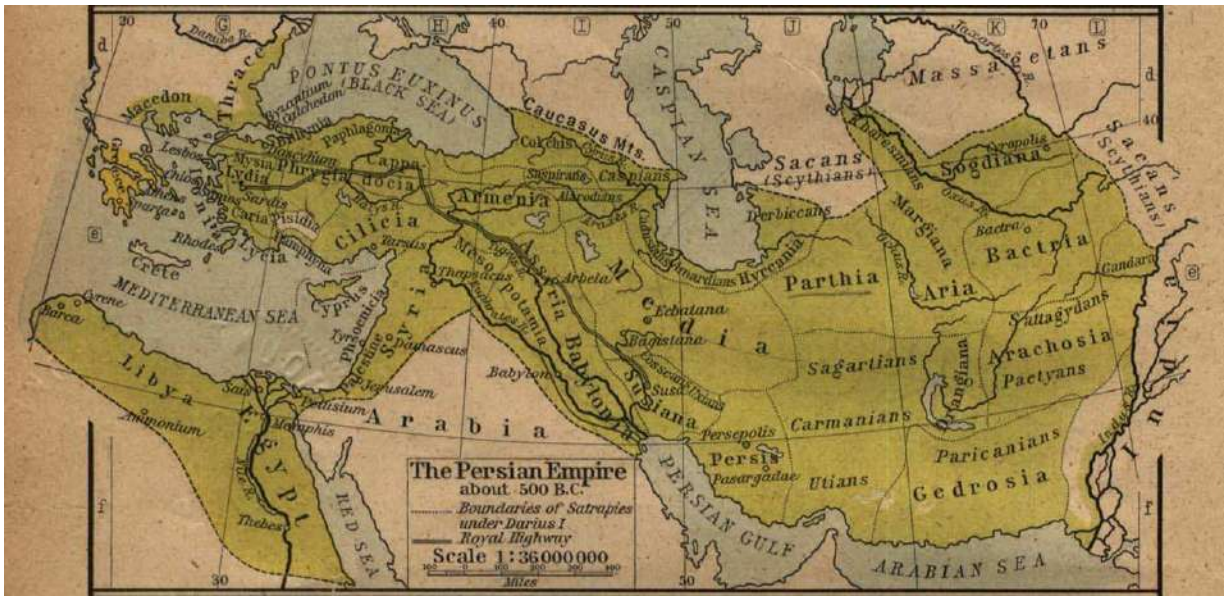
After spending eleven years consolidating his rule, Cyrus turned his attention to the Neo-Babylonian Empire. In 539 BCE, he invaded. Here is where the source material becomes murky once more. Primary sources such as the Babylonian Chronicles and an artifact called the Cyrus Cylinder—literally an ancient cylinder with writing engraved in the pottery—indicate that the city of Babylon fell to Persia without a fight, which could indicate

the rulers realized they were overpowered and outnumbered. However, ancient Greek historians like the legendary Herodotus, who, while prone to exaggeration is also a great source for ancient accounts of empires, indicates there was a siege. To further complicate matters, Abrahamic religious texts like the Torah and Bible state that Babylon fell after a single night's worth of battle, which resulted in the death of Prince Belshazzar.

Which is true?

When historians and archaeologists are faced with these many disparate accounts, especially when examining ancient history, the truth can often be found somewhere in the middle. Each of the three sources of information possess inherent flaws that need to be addressed, which is a common practice for historians no matter what era they study. Ancient tablets tend to be heavily skewed in favor of the king who ordered their creation, Greek historians liked to exaggerate and make fantastic stories, and religious texts cannot be considered historical canon without evidence for a combination of the last two reasons.

Keeping all of this in mind, what likely happened was a battle between the Persians and the Babylonians at a place called Opis where the Babylonians lost. Without the strength of the Babylonian army, many of the other major cities surrendered without fighting the invaders, and Nabonidus, who had been camped with his army in the south, most likely fled to Babylon or Borsippa. Belshazzar died in battle, and the governor of Assyria, a general named Gobryas, sided with the Persians, pursued Nabonidus, and killed him without the need to besiege any of the cities. As a reward, Cyrus named Gobryas the new governor of Babylon, which became a province in the Achaemenid Persian Empire.




*Babylonia and Assyria in the Achaemenid Empire*

**The Assimilation of Babylonia**

The Persians divided the Neo-Babylonian Empire into several separate provinces and colonies with the main two being Babylon and Assyria. Their gradual integration started around 539 BCE and would continue for centuries as Achaemenid Persia dominated the Mesopotamian landscape. Although the Babylonian elite grumbled at the thought of a new power, many commoners and disaffected ethnic or cultural groups within the territory rejoiced. One of Cyrus' first actions upon consolidating his rule was to allow foreign exiles to return to their homes. In particular, he allowed the thousands of Jews who had been abducted and forcibly sent from Judah to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar II to return home. With them, they could bring their consecrated religious symbols, including images and vessels.

It's telling that Cyrus is referred to in Abrahamic religious texts as the liberator of the Jewish people and is one of the only non-believing individuals to be called a messiah. In biblical accounts, he is the man who releases the Jews from their Babylonian captivity. Although they would live under Persian rule for centuries, the Jews were able to return home and never officially rebelled or took up arms against their rulers.

Meanwhile, regular and native Babylonians still needed to be appeased. One of their greatest laws was that none could claim the right to rule over the territory until he had been consecrated into the office by the high priests. To appease this faction, Cyrus went through with the consecration, took the

title of the King of Babylon, and justified his rule by claiming to be the successor of the original Babylonian kings and chosen by the patron deity Marduk to restore justice, order, and peace to southern Mesopotamia. Through this system, Cyrus managed to keep the peace and appease the priesthood of Marduk until his death.

**Darius, Unrest, and Decline**

Peace remained in Babylonia until roughly 521 BCE. By this time, Cyrus the Great and his son, Cambyses II, were both deceased and a new claimant to the throne emerged—Darius I. Darius I came to power in 522 BCE after defeating a usurper who had killed Cambyses and attempted to gain control of the empire. Darius I, also called Darius the Great, saw no reason to appease the Babylonians and abandoned the "chosen by Marduk" narrative in favor of pushing forward the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic faith, meaning it has one god, and identifies the duality of good and evil. Good will eventually triumph over and destroy evil, and there was a single supreme being of wisdom whom the Persians worshipped. While this wasn't the sole reason for a Babylonian revolt, it did destroy Persian claims to legitimacy.[42]

*A Frieze of Darius I's Palace in Susa*

Once Darius I came into power, Babylonia tried to assert its independence under a new ruler called Nebuchadnezzar III—readers will note the originality here. Nebuchadnezzar III ruled for less than a year before the Persians appeared and put down the rebellion in spectacular, bloody fashion. At the same time, Darius I held off similar revolts throughout the empire and reconquered Assyria. Six years later in 514 BCE, the Babylonians once again declared independence, this time under the leadership of an Armenian man named Arakha, who renamed himself Nebuchadnezzar IV. Darius I reclaimed the territory once again and partly destroyed Babylon's walls during the siege. These would not be rebuilt.

Here, the story of Babylonia grows complacent. There were no more major revolts or revolutions for the next two centuries, and the city of Babylon slowly lost its importance and luster as peoples left and moved to the

greater cultural capitals of the Persian Empire. Around 331 BCE, the Macedonians fought and kicked out the Persians, led by one of the grandest names in history—Alexander the Great. Alexander would die in Babylon in 323 BCE, most likely due to typhoid fever, although some believe he may have been poisoned. Once Alexander's former generals went to war, Babylonia and Assyria became a part of the Seleucid Empire, still controlled by the Macedonians.[43]

Babylonia lost its importance, although urban life continued much the same as it had for centuries well into the 1st century BCE. The region would be absorbed again and again into new empires, states, and countries, but never again would it claim independence.

The final fall of Babylon was complete.

# Chapter 10 – Religion, Mythology, and the Creation Myths

The religion of the Babylonians was that of Mesopotamia. The region possessed a cohesive cosmology, mythology, and structure of deities which were passed down over centuries. No matter what culture reigned supreme, whether it be the Sumerians, Akkadians, or the official Babylonians, the religion remained almost exactly the same. This religion was polytheistic, meaning there was more than one deity. Deities tended to have different domains, or areas of the earth and heavens over which they possessed control. There could be a god of the harvest, a god of storms, a goddess of fertility, or a goddess of love, among many others.

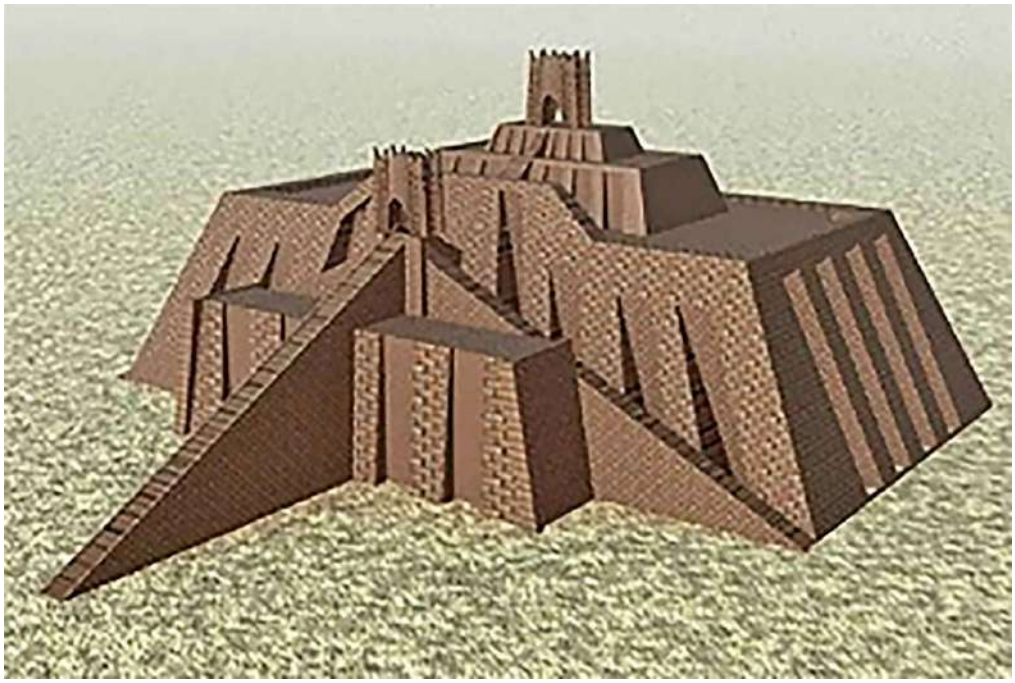
Since religion stayed similar over millennia, this chapter provides an overview of major developments that occurred within the Mesopotamian religion, including changes under the Neo-Babylonian Empire. A brief overview of what happened to the religion once the Hellenistic Period arrived is additionally included. Afterward, there is a description of several of the major deities.

**The Mesopotamians**

The Mesopotamian religion, as it relates to the Babylonians, started with the Sumerians. As mentioned many chapters ago, the Sumerians were the precursors to the official Babylonians which heavily influenced the culture, religion, politics, and economy of their successors. Many ethnic Sumerians would eventually become Babylonians as the people stayed within Mesopotamia. The Sumerians possessed a theocratic society, or one ruled by religious tenets, beliefs, and usually a class of priests or other spiritual leaders. Sumerians were so dedicated to their religion and mythology that almost every aspect of life was seen to have been governed by one of the deities.

Before a kingship developed in Sumer, there were the theocratic city-states with ruling priests. The most significant cultural buildings were temples. Originally, these structures were constructed from simple stone and consisted of a single room for worship. As time went on, the buildings morphed into the legendary ziggurats. A ziggurat was a tall tower with a

central sanctuary at the very top. It was not a triangle but instead consisted of multiple terraced levels with broad stairs which could be climbed to reach the sanctuary.



*A Computer-Generated Model of a Ziggurat*

These ziggurats were not public. Sumerians believed them to be the dwelling places of the gods, so access was forbidden for the majority of the population. Some professionals speculate that part of the design, with its numerous levels, was so guards could be posted around the stairwells to keep the common folk from spying on religious rites and ceremonies. Each Sumerian city possessed a patron deity whose rites and rituals would be performed more often than others. There exists one major, well-preserved ziggurat still in existence: the Chogha Zanbil in Iran.

Almost all Sumerian myths were passed down through an elaborate oral tradition. An oral tradition is one where members of a culture learn about their people's history, stories, and religion through storytelling, or one person relating the tales to another. Written accounts didn't appear until the end of the Early Dynastic Period around 2600 BCE. These writings, in addition to the oral tradition, helped preserve Sumerian religion when their power waned.

When the Akkadians started to displace the Sumerians, they adapted Sumerian religious beliefs into their own pantheon, where they were combined with preexisting rhetoric and ideas. Unfortunately for historians,

archaeologists, and other individuals interested in culture, many of the original Akkadian beliefs have been lost to time. What is known is that many of the major Sumerian deities absorbed the spots held by their Akkadian counterparts and developed new names. For example, the Sumerian god An became the Akkadian god Anu with the same backstory, domain, and chief cities of worship.

Finally, the Babylonians emerged. The Amorite Babylonians actually kept many of the traditional Sumerian and Akkadian deities but made several major changes to the pantheon. In particular, they added the god Marduk and ordained him as the head of the pantheon. The original goddess Inanna's role was also transferred to a new deity called Ishtar. Otherwise, the world remained the same, and the Babylonians preserved the Sumerian and Akkadian languages for the purpose of worship.

**The Mesopotamian Creation Myth**

There are several Mesopotamian creation myths, or stories which focus on how the earth, heavens, and humans came to be. The main two are called "The Eridu Genesis" and "Enûma Eliš." The first is Sumerian and the second is Babylonian, but there are many more that describe smaller acts of creation. Some of these others are the "Debate Between Sheep and Grain," "Song of the Hoe," and "Debate Between Summer and Winter." It's a common theme throughout the myths where origin stories are told during conversations between personified objects, animals, seasons, and other inanimate creations.

The earliest Sumerian creation myth comes from a clay tablet discovered by archaeologists during an excavation in Nippur. The document appears to be from 1600 BCE, indicating that it was recorded late in the time of the Sumerians. Historian Thorkild Jacobsen named the tablet "The Eridu Genesis" myth and translated the cuneiform. Because of the advanced age of the relic, several pieces are missing or the inscription has been worn away by the literal sands of time. However, contemporary audiences can still piece together the rudimentary story. It goes as follows:

Nintur was paying attention:

Let me bethink myself of my humankind,

all forgotten as they are;

and mindful of mine,

Nintur's creatures let me bring them back

let me lead the people back from their trails.

May they come and build cities and cult places,
that I may cool myself in their shade;
may they lay the bricks for the cult cities in pure spots
and may they found places for divination in pure spots!

She gave directions for purification and cries for clemency,
the things that cool divine wrath,
perfected the divine service and the august offices,
said to the surrounding regions: “Let me institute peace there!”
When An, Enlil, Enki and Ninhursaga
fashioned the dark-headed people (a name the Sumerians gave themselves)
they had made the small animals that come up from out of the earth,
come from the earth in abundance
and had let there be, as it befits it, gazelles
wild donkeys, and four-footed beasts in the desert.

...and let me have him advise;
let me have him oversee their labor,
and let him teach the nation to follow along
unerringly like cattle!

When the royal scepter was coming down from heaven,
the august crown and the royal throne being already
down from heaven,
he (the king) regularly performed to perfection
the august divine services and offices,
laid the bricks of those cities in pure spots.
They were named by name and allotted half-bushel baskets.

The firstling of those cities, Eridu,
she gave to the leader Nudimmud,

the second, Bad-Tibira, she gave to the prince and the sacred one,
the third, Larak, she gave to Pabilsag,
the fourth, Sippar, she gave to the gallant Utu.
The fifth, Shuruppak, she gave to Ansud.

These cities, which had been named by names,
and had been allotted half-bushel baskets,
dredged the canals, which were blocked with purplish
wind-borne clay, and they carried water.
Their cleaning of the smaller canals
established abundant growth.[44]

A piece is missing here which describes how the noise created by the humans and their cities annoyed the chief god, Enlil, so greatly that he decided to eliminate the Sumerians entirely. He persuaded the divine assembly of the various deities to vote for human destruction through a massive storm that would flood the world. Savvy students of history, mythology, or religion will note the parallel of Sumerian legend with numerous others around the world.

The deluge myth, or the idea that the gods sent a great flood to wipe out humanity, appears in almost every major religion discovered across the globe, including Christianity, Hinduism, ancient Chinese mythology, ancient Norse mythology, ancient Greek mythology, Mayan mythology, the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa tribe, the Aboriginals of Australia, and numerous other indigenous tribes throughout both American continents. The Mesopotamian flood myths, or those belonging to the Sumerians, future Babylonians, and others, are among the first.

Anthropologists suspect that these first renderings and writings of religion spread beyond Mesopotamia and influenced numerous other cultures across the combined landmass of Africa, Asia, and Europe, but it doesn't explain how it crossed the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans unless the theory of gargantuan land bridges is true. Others, in particular the scholars of geology and the evolution of the planet, believe that something of climatological significance must have happened during humanity's earliest years, causing it to be recorded. No matter what the case may be, the Sumerian creation myth continues.

That day Nintur wept over her creatures
and holy Inanna was full of grief over their people;
but Enki took counsel with his own heart.
An, Enlil, Enki, and Ninhursaga
had the gods of heaven and earth swear
by the names of An and Enlil.

At that time, Ziusudra was king
and lustration priest.
He fashioned, being a seer, the god of giddiness
and stood in awe beside it, wording his wishes humbly.

As he stood there regularly day after day
something that was not a dream was appearing:
conversation
a swearing of oaths by heaven and earth,
a touching of throats
and the gods bringing their thwarts up to Kiur.

And as Ziusudra stood there beside it, he went on hearing:
Step up to the wall to my left and listen!
Let me speak a word to you at the wall
and may you grasp what I say,
may you heed my advice!
By our hand a flood will sweep over
the cities of the half-bushel baskets, and the country;
the decision, that mankind is to be destroyed
has been made.
A verdict, a command of the assembly cannot be revoked,
an order of An and Enlil is not known
ever to have been countermanded,
their kingship, their term, has been uprooted
they must bethink themselves of that.

Now...
What I have to say to you...[45]
The part that is next missing appears to have been advice from the trickster deity, Enki, to build a boat and fill it with a male and female pair of each of the animals upon the earth. Readers will once again note the parallels between this deluge myth and others, including the biblical story of Noah and the Ark. Ziusudra, the king, obeys and manages to save humanity and the animals from the flood, but Enki's plan is discovered when Enlil finds the survivors. He is about to massacre them when Enki convinces the counsel of the divine to spare humanity. The story ends with two stanzas of verse which explain how Ziusudra ascended in the hierarchy of the heavens and the Sumerians were spared.
You here have sworn
by the life's breath of heaven
the life's breath of earth
that he verily is allied with yourself;
you there, An and Enlil,
have sworn by the life's breath of heaven,
the life's breath of earth.
That he is allied with all of you.
He will disembark the small animals
that come up from the earth!

Ziusudra, being king,
stepped up before An and Enlil
kissing the ground.
And An and Enlil after honoring him
were granting him life like a god's,
were making lasting breath of life, like a god's,
descend into him.
That day they made Ziusudra,
preserver, as king, of the name of the small
animals and the seed of mankind,
live toward the east over the mountains

in mount Dilmun.[46]

Many of the significant Mesopotamian deities appear in this myth. Chief among the pantheon were An and Enlil, believed to have created the heavens and skies. The Mesopotamian gods were not human, and representations tended to make them anthropomorphic. Each one was a being of tremendous size, similar to a giant, with unfathomable power. Stone carvings and depictions showed the deities wearing horned caps at all times and special *melam* capable of inspiring terror and awe in any mortal who saw it.

**The Babylonian Creation Myth**

Historians place the development of the Babylonian creation myth, the "Enûma Eliš," to the time of Hammurabi, or around the 1700s BCE. There are several versions of the story, but the most well-preserved dates around the 7th century BCE and comes from the Library of Ashurbanipal. It's inscribed in seven tablets and varies significantly from the original Sumerian creation myth, but presents similar themes and ideas. An excerpt from the translated first tablet is shown below:

**Tablet I**

When the heavens above did not exist,
And earth beneath had not come into being —
There was Apsû, the first in order, their begetter,
And demiurge Tia-mat, who gave birth to them all;
They had mingled their waters together
Before meadow-land had coalesced and reed-bed was to be found —
When not one of the gods had been formed
Or had come into being, when no destinies had been decreed,
The gods were created within them:
Lah-mu and Lah-amu were formed and came into being.
While they grew and increased in stature
Anšar and Kišar, who excelled them, were created.
They prolonged their days, they multiplied their years.
Anu, their son, could rival his fathers.
Anu, the son, plendo Anšar,
And Anu begat Nudimmud, his own equal.
Nudimmud was the champion among his fathers:

Profoundly discerning, wise, of robust strength;
Very much stronger than his father’s begetter, Anšar
He had no rival among the gods, his brothers.
The divine brothers came together,
Their clamour got loud, throwing Tia-mat into a turmoil.
They jarred the nerves of Tia-mat,
And by their dancing they spread alarm in Anduruna.
Apsû did not diminish their clamour,
And Tia-mat was silent when confronted with them.
Their conduct was displeasing to her,
Yet though their plendor was not good, she wished to spare them.[47]

The first tablet covers the creation of literally everything, for before Apsû and Tiamat there was nothing. From these two original deities came others, who disturbed Tiamat. To fight against them, Tiamat proposed the creation of monsters that would stop the direction in which the universe was moving. The following five tablets detail how her plan would not come to fruition as several of the younger gods plot against her. Marduk is made the new overlord of all of the deities, slays Tiamat by bashing her skull in with a mace, and uses her body to create the heavens and earth as humans know it. Marduk then goes about creating humans by sacrificing one of the other gods and using their blood to form the first Babylonians. At this point, the creation story ends with an entire tablet dedicated to praising Marduk and reading fifty of his numerous names, which indicates just how central to Babylonian religion this god was. Part of the translated text of Tablet VII is included here so readers get an idea of all of the things that were attributed to this single deity.

**Tablet VII**

Asarre, the giver of arable land who established plough-land,
The creator of barley and flax, who made plant life grow.
Asaralim, who is revered in the counsel chamber, whose counsel excels,
The gods heed it and grasp fear of him.
Asaralimnunna, the noble, the light of the father, his begetter,
Who directs the decrees of Anu, Enlil, and Ea, that is Ninšiku.
He is their provisioner, who assigns their incomes,
Whose turban multiplies abundance for the land.

Tutu is he, who accomplishes their renovation,
Let him purify their sanctuaries that they may repose.
Let him fashion an incantation that the gods may rest,
Though they rise up in fury, let them withdraw.
He is indeed exalted in the assembly of the gods, his [fathers],
No one among the gods can [equal] him.
Tutu-Ziukkinna, the life of [his] host,
Who established, the pure heavens for the gods,
Who took charge of their courses, who appointed [their stations],
May he not be forgotten among mortals, but [let them remember] his deeds.
Tutu-Ziku they called him thirdly, the establisher of purification,
The god of the pleasant breeze, lord of success and obedience,
Who produces bounty and wealth, who establishes abundance,
Who turns everything scant that we have into profusion,
Whose pleasant breeze we sniffed in time of terrible trouble,
Let men command that his praises be constantly uttered, let them offer worship to
him.

Marduk thus took his place at the head of the Babylonian pantheon, rising above many of the other deities. Other gods of note were individuals like Ishtar and Nergal, who controlled love, war, sexuality, and the underworld. In particular, Ishtar possessed one of the largest cults in Babylonia and was considered the principal goddess for women, marriage, and childbirth in addition to being a fierce, warlike deity. Nergal, meanwhile, represented fire and the desert in addition to the underworld, and frequently appeared as a lion in his depictions. In contrast to the popular Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, Nergal was not the original god of the underworld but actually married Ereshkigal, who shared her power with him. Nergal could not stay the entire year and would leave for six months at a time, demonstrating the changing of the seasons.[48]

# Chapter 11 – The Short Version of the Biblical Babylonians

Babylon frequently appears in the Abrahamic religions as a symbol of decadence and sin. When referenced in documents like the Bible, it's important to realize that different passages are referring to the Babylonian Empire and to the city of Babylon itself, although both possessed the same connotations. The primary reason for the presence of Babylonia in these documents is the perpetual struggle that existed between the Babylonians and the Jewish people, who lived to the west in a region known as the Levant. During the second and first millennia BCE, the Jewish people attempted to form their own kingdoms but were frequently overrun, conquered, and turned into vassals by their more powerful neighbors. At one point, these conquerors were the kings of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, who uprooted thousands of the Jewish people from their homes following a rebellion and forced them to live in Babylonia as captives.

This action became known in religious texts as the Babylonian captivity. Once the Neo-Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians and Cyrus the Great, the Jewish people were able to return home and wrote about their experiences in Babylonia in their religious documents. Now, it's important to realize once more that historians and archaeologists cannot accept documents like the Torah or Bible as fact simply because the physical historical evidence does not exist. This does not mean that Judaism or Christianity is not true, but it does color the perception of events. For the purposes of this chapter, what was written in the documents of Abrahamic religions needs to be taken with a grain of salt as the religious texts were repeatedly edited by the kings, high priests, and nobility to reiterate the Israelite belief that they were God's chosen people, that the nobles and kings possessed a divine right to rule, and that the Babylonians were clearly a sinful people being punished for daring to act against the Jewish people.

*The Fall of Babylon, 1453 Woodcut*

**The Babylonian Captivity**

Keeping all of this in mind, Abrahamic religious documents tell a different story of the Babylonian captivity than that explained by historic sources as seen in previous chapters. According to the Bible, the situation went something like this:

> The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah (that was the first year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon), which the prophet Jeremiah spoke to all the people of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem:
>
> For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, to this day, the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened.
>
> And though the Lord persistently sent you all his servants the prophets, you have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear when they said, “Turn now, every one of you, from your evil way and wicked doings, and you will remain upon the land that the Lord has given to you and your ancestors from of old and forever; do not go

> after other gods to serve and worship them, and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm."
>
> Yet you did not listen to me, says the Lord, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.
>
> Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace.
>
> And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp.
>
> This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.
>
> Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.
>
> I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.
>
> For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.[49]

In this version of events, the Israelite god is punishing the people for their sins and failure to uphold the tenets of worship properly. The Neo-Babylonian Empire is sent to remove the Jewish people from their homeland where they can suffer until a time comes when they may return to their territory once more as God's chosen people. This text then places the Persians in the role of liberators, once more sent by God specifically to aid the Jewish people while ignoring the geopolitical intricacies unfolding in the region. Babylon, meanwhile, is destroyed for being sinful and failing to worship the proper deity.

*James Tissot, The Flight of the Prisoners*

**The Whore of Babylon**

The other major instance of Babylon appearing in Abrahamic religious texts is the strange tale of the Whore of Babylon, who remains an iconic figure in Western civilization. She was a symbolic figure meant to represent evil and the temptations experienced by humans while on earth. She appears in the Book of Revelations in the following passage:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters,

with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.”

And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.

The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.

And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.[50]

The Whore of Babylon is frequently associated with the Antichrist as well as the Beast of Revelation. She is not a real person so much as a representation of idolatry and other major sins which would keep practitioners of Judaism and Christianity out of Heaven. Historians and theologians alike speculate that she is associated with Babylon because of the aforementioned Babylonian captivity and previous comparisons that indicate Babylon equals sin and excess.

*The Whore of Babylon Atop the Seven-Headed Beast*

# Conclusion – The Legacy of the Babylonians

So, why should a contemporary audience care about the Babylonians?

It can be difficult for modern individuals to realize how much the actions of civilizations from thousands of years ago impact their lives in the present day. The Babylonians were responsible for several major scientific breakthroughs, including new mathematical methods for understanding the cosmos and creating calendars. They charted the stars, discovered new building materials, and laid the foundations for other civilizations like the Greeks and Romans, who continue to be upheld by Western civilizations as the great forebearers of contemporary political and social intellectualism.

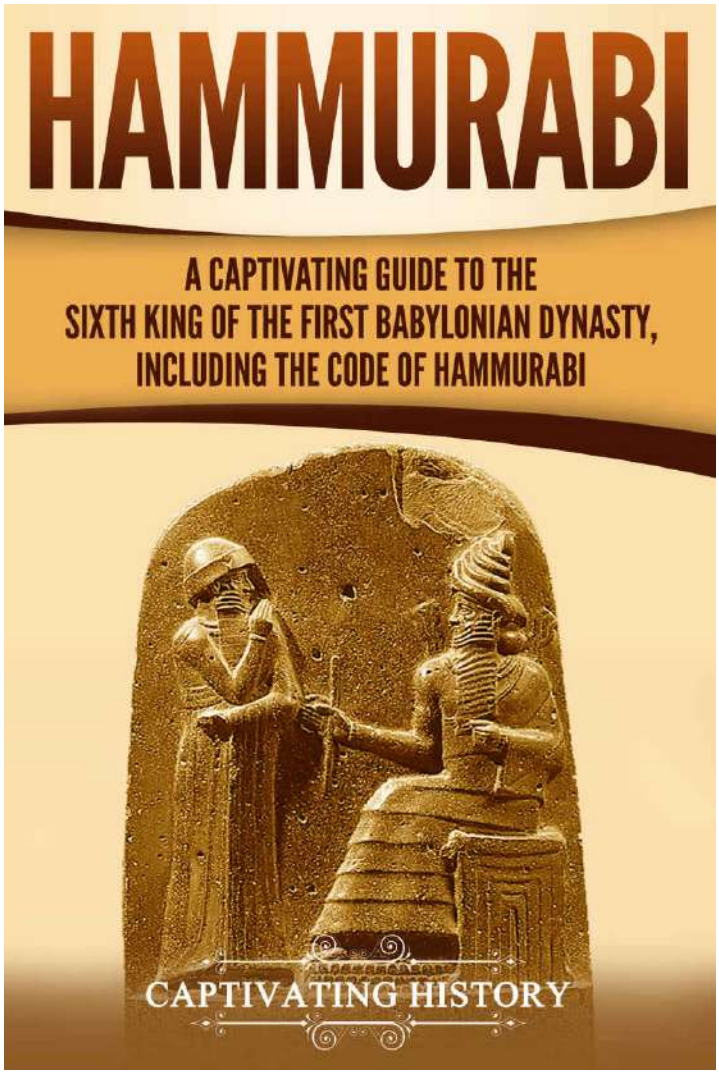
Like many of the other Mesopotamian civilizations, the Babylonians advanced agriculture, metallurgy, warfare, and other essential practices so humans didn't have to start over again every time a new people tried to develop their own culture. Frequent warfare and trade with other civilizations throughout the Near East, Asia Minor, and northern Africa also meant culture, religion, and techniques could travel great distances.

Babylon or Babylonia even had a great effect on the development of the Abrahamic religions, as there would be no captivity narrative without them!

Even if someone doesn't care too much about these vital essentials, they can still appreciate the complexity of a culture that survived for multiple millennia and spawned beautiful artwork, intricate religion and worship, and unique laws and the basis for future legal systems around the world. After all, it was Hammurabi who came up with the infamous "an eye for an eye" viewpoint for examining the world and justice.

Keeping all of this in mind, it would be difficult to imagine a world without the Babylonians. History is very much a tapestry: If someone pulls out one thread, the entire thing starts to unravel. This is the position of the Babylonians: A crucial thread that can't be removed without dismantling the course of human civilization as the contemporary world knows it.

# Part 6: Hammurabi
# A Captivating Guide to the Sixth King of the First Babylonian Dynasty, Including the Code of Hammurabi


HAMMURABI
A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO THE
SIXTH KING OF THE FIRST BABYLONIAN DYNASTY,
INCLUDING THE CODE OF HAMMURABI
CAPTIVATING HISTORY

# Introduction

Ancient Mesopotamia is a region both shrouded in mystery and laden with fascinating stories. More often than not, they speak of strong heroes, epic rulers, and the matters of both gods and men. And the more we uncover about its history, the more fascinating it becomes. We learn that these people weren't as savage or barbaric as we are today, that their worldviews, attitudes, and everyday customs match ours more closely than once thought, and that they have plenty of stories to tell that are eerily similar to ours.

It's this very region that gave the world some of the most powerful, most enigmatic rulers. Gilgamesh, a king himself, outgrew that title and became a literary, deified figure to many generations to come. Sargon the Great became the first emperor to unite multiple people under his firm hand. Ur-Nammu rekindled the Sumerian old ways and gave the region one of the most developed, exalted cultures to exist in the ancient Middle East. And these are merely three of the dozens of rulers that, in one way or another, changed the world set between the Tigris and the Euphrates.

However, there are very few, if any, kings of this region as revered, as mighty, and as famed as the Babylonian king known as Hammurabi. Reading the endless barrage of literature about this monarch gives us a vivid picture of how a tiny, insignificant city became the dominant force in the Middle East, how a marginal ruler became the great unifier who brought about the laws of the land and pacified vast peoples of many different cities, and how the area between the two great rivers became united for the first time, even if it lasted less than half a decade.

Reading on, you will learn of who Hammurabi actually was. You'll see where Babylon stood during the rule of his immediate ancestors, what Hammurabi did before he decided to wage war against the world, how others saw him—from rival rulers to his own dignitaries—and how his now-famous Code came to prominence. You'll also learn more about this very Code, what it was (and what it wasn't), what it contained (and what it no longer contains), how it was lost, how it was found, and how its discovery brought Hammurabi back into the public eye many millennia later.

The story of Hammurabi is the story of forty-three years jampacked with conquest, temple and wall building, irrigation efforts, and lawmaking, but

it’s also a story of broken relations and rising and falling empires. It’s a story of betrayal and shifting alliances, a story where even the gods take a backseat to the matters of common men. It’s a tale that’s both thousands of years old and, interestingly enough, just as contemporary as it was when Hammurabi still drew breath. And, like all great tales of history, it’s a yarn that teaches the common man that no feat of greatness comes without a price, and that human nature is just as complex as it was when Babylonians praised Marduk and hailed Hammurabi as a god in his own right.

# Chapter 1 – Babylon Before Hammurabi: Position of the City in Mesopotamia, Early Rulers

It's not an exaggeration to say that Babylon became a prominent and important city because of Hammurabi. Before this king came to power, the city was little more than a vassal state to other major powers at the time. In fact, when one takes into account that Hammurabi was the sixth ruler of the First Babylonian dynasty and that literally no ruler before him has any noteworthy mention in the contemporary Babylonian texts (other than the usual year dates and an occasional cuneiform letter here or there), you can see how instrumental this king was to the rapid development of this city. In this respect, Babylon is much like Akkad and Isin before it, and both Sargon the Great and Ishbi-Erra, to an extent, stand shoulder to shoulder with Hammurabi in terms of putting their respective cities "on the map," so to speak.

# Position of Babylon - Geography

Babylon was located in today's Hillah within the Babil governorate in Iraq. In terms of ancient Mesopotamia, the city was closest to ancient Kish, south of Sippar and Eshnunna and north of Nippur and Isin. Despite how minor it was in terms of power and politics, Babylon was still an important river port, as the Euphrates went right through the city, "splitting" it in two. Part of the reason why a lot of Babylon remains unexcavated is because the river eventually changed course, and a section of the city wound up under water.

The archeological site of Babylon today consists of several mounds. Each of these mounds stretches in an area roughly 2 by 1 km or 1.2 by 0.6 miles in size and they contain mud bricks and debris. Like all Mesopotamian cities, Babylon had no major forests nor was there a major mountain in its close vicinity. As such, it had issues obtaining raw materials such as wood, stone, different metals, and precious stones, but it had an abundance of fish, different crops, and cattle. Of course, Babylon relied on trade and had a well-developed network of river-faring merchants.

# Position of Babylon – Politics and Power

The first mention of Babylon as a city comes to us from the time of Sargon of Akkad, as he boasted that he had rebuilt temples in this town. At the time, Babylon had no significant rulers and merely existed as a port along the Euphrates. There was a debate within the scholar community about Sargon being the original founder of Babylon, which is largely accepted as apocryphal. A few historians even attribute the founding of Babylon to a later Assyrian ruler known as Sargon II. However, the original Sargon's dynasty did indeed have their fingerprints over this, at the time, tiny city.

Naram-sin, the legendary ruler almost as revered as his ancestor Sargon (and who ruled a quarter of a century after him), held most of Mesopotamia in his grasp and even declared himself a god during his lifetime. However, maintaining an empire of this size only brought problems to his son and successor, Shar-kali-sharri. Considering how many defensive wars this emperor had to participate in, it was only natural that he had to maintain order in non-Akkadian territories his father conquered, and that meant appeasing the constituents. In ancient Mesopotamia at the time, this meant repairing and rebuilding old temples and building new ones. One of the cities where Shar-kali-sharri built a new temple was Nippur, an important religious and political city of the entire region. Curiously, the second city that Shar-kali-sharri honored with a new temple, or rather two temples (which we have available records of), was Babylon. While this action in and of itself didn't elevate Babylon to a position of higher influence, it was still a noteworthy event that, we can assume, tells us the city held at least some prominence to an ancient Mesopotamian man.

The famous Ur III period didn't "ignore" Babylon either. Throughout the reign of Ur's last five Sumerian rulers, Babylon had to pay in-kind taxes, i.e., taxes in goods rather than money. In addition, the kings of Ur appointed local governors themselves, letting us know that Babylon was indeed subordinate to them in full.

# Early Rulers of Babylon

After the fall of Ur, the entire area where Babylon lay was conquered by Amorites. While they were Semitic themselves, they spoke with a different dialect and had an entirely different lifestyle to the Semitic people inhabiting cities. Like most tribes outside of Mesopotamia proper, they were nomadic and rarely settled. However, with the passage of time, some of the Amorite merchants actually established strong dynasties of many independent cities, and their influence kept growing.

Babylon at the time was a vassal state of Kazallu. Sources vary, but the first ruler to break Babylon away from Kazallu was one Sumu-Abum, also known as Su-abu. Alongside his son, Sumu-la-El, he's regarded as the builder of Babylon's walls, and it's still debatable which one is the proper "first" ruler of Babylon.

This problem of "picking" the first ruler of Babylon actually continues up to Hammurabi's father and predecessor, Sin-Muballit. The four rulers before him—Sumu-Abum, Sumu-la-El, Sabium, and Apil-Sin—were all kings, but neither of the four claimed kingship of the city itself. In other words, the center of their kingdom, whatever it was, wasn't Babylon. Sin-Muballit was the first ruler to break away from this practice and use that title in reference to the city.

Of course, Sin-Muballit didn't differ from his predecessors in this respect alone. In fact, this pre-Hammurabi king is the one we have the most available data of. Unlike the four kings before him, Sin-Muballit actually expanded the territory of the city, and in a remarkable way. Namely, he took control of Isin, which was a major powerhouse itself not long before. Granted, by the time of Sin-Muballit, Isin was a shell of its former self, which made it easy to conquer, but in terms of military successes, this was still a major one for a ruler of an insignificant city such as Babylon was at the time. Before the end of his reign, Babylon held dominion over Borsippa, Sippar, and Kish.

One look at the year names, or calendar dates, of Sin-Muballit tells us of his prolific tradition of building temples and rebuilding and fortifying walls. Much like any conqueror before him, Sin-Muballit was likely trying to win favor with his subjects, and major construction projects were the typical way to do this. He is also credited, again via year names, of digging and maintaining a few canals. Before we move on, we ought to stress that, at the

time, all Ancient Mesopotamian monarchs “named” their years after a particular achievement or important event. Much like all contemporary sources, they aren’t entirely reliable, as they were often used to boost the ruler’s position and at times outright ignored contemporary historical facts.

Despite his conquests, however, it’s likely that he was himself a vassal, or at least a subordinate, of Shamshi-Adad I. As such, he was the contemporary of the expansion of Larsa under Rim-Sin I, the sack of Isin by said ruler, and the growth and expansion of Eshnunna, Elam, and Mari, all of them at some point both allies and enemies of his son. It is widely accepted that he abdicated the throne due to failing health.

# Chapter 2 – Rise of Hammurabi: Wars and Achievements

# Chronology of Hammurabi

Before we move onto what Hammurabi did and when he did it, it's important to talk about chronologies, as they are intimately related to this ruler.

Two widely accepted ways of dating events in early history are called the short and the middle chronology (though they are by no means the only ones). The discrepancy between the two roughly equates 64 years. For this particular topic, we shall be using the middle chronology since it's a bit more accurate than the short one, though still not as reliable as historians would want it to be.

Another stumbling block is the fact that the Babylonian year was based on the lunar calendar and began in March rather than January. This means that, at times, the Babylonian years lasted 13 months rather than 12. Despite using the term "BCE" here, you should take these particularities into consideration, as these dates don't really coincide perfectly with the Common Era dates we use today.

# Early Years

Most major events during Hammurabi's reign occur after 1792 BCE when he took over the throne from his father. When it comes to their origins, the entire family tree of Hammurabi has Amorite origins. Naturally, it's difficult to distinguish between native Semitic tribes at the time, and while names can be an indicator of the origins of a person in Mesopotamia, oftentimes it can further complicate things. Sin-Muballit, for example, translates to "the god Sin (Nanna) is the giver of life," and every word of that name is Akkadian rather than Amorite. But Hammurabi's name is a compound of both an Amorite term and an Akkadian adjective. "Hammu" or even "Ammu" means "family," and it's an Amorite term. "Rabi" or "Rapi," on the other hand, is Akkadian and means "great, grand." So, the rough meaning of his name is "a kinsman who heals," or even "an uncle is a healer."

The year 1792 is taken as his first year in power in the middle chronology. He ruled a grand total of 43 years, and we have year names of almost all of them, though some, of course, are damaged and difficult to discern. That's why it's difficult to place the creation of Hammurabi's famous Code, though the consensus usually puts it somewhere in the final four or five years of Hammurabi's reign, based on the Code's prologue. We shall discuss this in the chapter dedicated to the Code, and for now we'll focus on the first ten or so years of this great king's long reign.

Around this time, major kingdoms of old were either falling apart or already part of history. Isin, already once sacked by Hammurabi's father, also suffered under the mighty Rim-Sin of Larsa. Rim-Sin was still a contemporary of Hammurabi and, if the chronology is to be believed, was already in his mid- to late sixties when the young Babylonian sat on the throne. Larsa was a force in and of itself, developing somewhat parallel to Isin after the fall of Ur centuries ago. Rim-Sin and Sin-Muballit were foes in the last decade of the 18$^{th}$ century BCE, and one of their skirmishes involved Isin and Uruk, where a coalition of monarchs (including Sin-Muballit) revolted against the king of Larsa. These revolts were not without reason; Rim-Sin was growing more powerful, uniting most of southern Mesopotamia and, apparently, not slowing down. Controlling the riverways, either in the north or the south, was the goal of any ruler, as these were the most lucrative aspects of these regions. Not only were they great sources of

fish and arable land, but they were also like "highways" of the region, as it was where everything was transported—cattle, grain, people, statues, you name it. Any ruler who was close to capturing these riverways was a threat, and threats like these would result in common, yet always shaky, partnerships.

But Rim-Sin wasn't the only powerful ruler of the region. Shamshi-Adad, another Amorite like Hammurabi, ruled a vast area known by its modern moniker "Upper Mesopotamia." His greatest achievement is the conquest of Assur, making him, technically, an Assyrian king. He legitimized himself as one by adding his name to the official king's list of Assur, a practice which ended with his successor, Ishme-Dagan. Prior to the conquest of the Assyrian capital, however, Shamshi-Adad took over a city on the Tigris River called Ekallatum, as well as a few other settlements originally under Eshnunna, another powerful city-state at the time. What Rim-Sin was in the south, Shamshi-Adad was in the north—a capable conqueror with aspirations for more territory and a long list of enemies.

Mari, to the northwest of Babylon and southwest of Assur, was another major player in the region. Shamshi-Adad took it over in 1796, four years before Hammurabi ascended to the throne. He had appointed his son, Yasmah-Adad, as the ruler of the city, whereas Ishme-Dagan ruled Ekallatum. According to the correspondences at the time, Shamshi-Adad wasn't pleased with his son, and after his death, that same son of his would be defeated by a new ruler native to Mari called Zimri-Lim. This descendant of the Lim dynasty would be a major player during Hammurabi's reign, both as an ally and as an enemy to the Babylonian king.

However, Zimri-Lim wasn't the only ruler of this region to have communicated with Hammurabi. In fact, Yasmah-Adad wrote directly to the king, not treating him entirely favorably. As a still minor ruler with a small territory (which, aside from Babylon, included Kish, Sippar, and Borsippa), Hammurabi was more than likely treated as a mere vassal by both Shamshi-Adad and his sons during his earliest years on the throne.

Two additional powers also held dominion over others during the early years of Hammurabi. One was in the deep south, the Elamite state, with Susa as its capital. Rulers of Elam had influence as far north as Babylon, and their kingdom was strong, with a massive army and a long history of successful warfare. However, they didn't really do much during

Hammurabi's first years, opting to stay on the sidelines. The second power that claimed the fertile Mesopotamian lands was Eshnunna. While they, like Elam, didn't go after Babylon directly during the time of the First Dynasty, they still maintained a powerful stranglehold of several key areas around the Tigris, a few of which were found around modern Baghdad.

The stage was then set—Shamshi-Adad's state was beginning to crumble, Rim-Sin was still working on expanding Larsa's influence, Elam and Eshnunna remained on the sidelines (yet not entirely so), and Mari was undergoing a tumultuous rebirth. Where did this period see Hammurabi, though?

The first decade of Hammurabi's reign didn't contain a lot of wars. The most notable ones were campaigns against Uruk and Isin, as well as a campaign against a still unidentified city of Malgium. This city was evidently already under Elamite rule, but then Hammurabi "liberated it" by way of conquest. Still, these weren't particularly important events during this decade, at least not as important as Hammurabi's "establishing of justice throughout the land" and his building of a massive canal called "Hammurabi is abundance." Much like numerous rulers before him, Hammurabi wanted to earn favor with his subjects, and he did so by annulling or paying for outstanding debts. What followed was a series of temple and wall building campaigns, both in Babylon and in other occupied territories. Irrigation remained an important factor in a city's survival, so his choice to build and maintain a massive canal is hardly revolutionary. Aside from this, he also rebuilt and repaired a pre-existing canal dug by his grandfather Apil-Sin.

Hammurabi's second decade was equally lacking in terms of military conquest, as was his third. Two cities, Rapiqum and Szalibi, fell under his control soon after his conquest of Malgium. However, for the following nineteen years, according to the official year names, he didn't start any military campaigns. Most of this time was devoted to building temples, creating statues of various deities, and rebuilding cities in his possession. Most of these statues were made in honor of the sun god Shamash (Utu, in Sumerian), despite the fact that Babylon had a different titular deity, a still minor god called Marduk. It's hard to know what he was originally the god of, but most people associate him with water, judgment, vegetation, and magic. Naturally, after Hammurabi, the cult of Marduk grew, and he gained a wider following, which speaks volumes of this king's influence over the

region. In fact, Hammurabi himself was deified, which we will touch upon in later chapters.

One particular statue Hammurabi devoted an entire year to was that of Ishtar, or Inanna, the goddess of fertility, sex, and love, among other things. Even before Hammurabi, the cult of Inanna was widespread among rulers, and she was almost as important as Enlil, the god of the winds, or Anu, the ancestor of all Mesopotamian gods. Kings would regularly call themselves "consorts of Inanna" and perform rituals where they would marry the goddess. Semitic people (Akkadians and Babylonians included) had a largely similar religious system to the older Sumerians, and Hammurabi merely followed in the footsteps of his own ancestors when it came to this matter.

It wasn't until the 30th year of his rule that Hammurabi became the conqueror he's remembered as.

# Beating Elam

Elam was farther south than the other states, bordering the highlands of what is Fars today. The mountains at its edge contained precious raw materials such as tin and lapis lazuli. The former was often used to create bronze, which would further be fashioned into weaponry such as axes and blades. Lapis lazuli, on the other hand, was a commodity due to its beautiful blue color. Early Sumerians used it for creating jewelry, statues, and other trinkets of high value. Not only did Elam have direct access to these goods, but they also controlled all trade routes to get them. In short, Elam held economic sway over its northern and western Mesopotamian neighbors.

As stated earlier, Elam didn't go after the Mesopotamian states during the early years of Hammurabi's reign. They would occasionally help out a ruler here or there, such as when Shamshi-Adad led a campaign against the mountain-folk of Zagros in 1781 BCE, but other than that they didn't really interfere in Mesopotamia's complicated politics. However, events that followed slowly changed the minds of Elamites, and they shifted from a somewhat passive observer to an active warring conqueror.

Shamshi-Adad died in 1776, which resulted in an expected fragmentation and decline of his massive state. His sons were still in power, but more and more rebellions popped up everywhere. However, the problem his dying empire was facing had more to do with external rather than internal politics. In other words, the declining empire centered around Assur was facing the rise of other city-states, with Eshnunna being a major player. Eshnunna was an important port city of the Tigris River, but more importantly, it stood between Elam and the passage to the other great river, the Euphrates. Nine years after Shamshi-Adad's death, in 1767, Elam's ruler, Siwe-Palar-Khuppak, began his correspondence with Zimri-Lim of Mari, who at the time had taken full control of the city, liberating it from Yasmah-Adad and possibly even killing him. Zimri-Lim did this with the aid of Yarim-Lim, the second ruler of Yamhad; this kingdom had then established seniority over Mari and would be an important ally of Hammurabi after the events of the 1767 conflict between Mari and Elam.

But before they became enemies, Mari and Elam were allies. Zimri-Lim wanted to crush the king of Eshnunna, Ibal-pi-el II, since he led regular raids and attacks on Mari territory. Babylon was also part of this alliance, but without any direct warring on the side of Hammurabi. Sometime

between the end of 1766 and the beginning of 1765, Elam and its allies sacked Eshnunna, and Ibal-pi-el II was nowhere to be seen, likely dying in the conflict. Siwe-Palar-Khuppak thus became an overlord of Eshnunna, and at that point, Elam had an important piece of territory that cut deep within Mesopotamia.

But the king of Elam was insatiable. Treating Zimri-Lim and Hammurabi as subordinate serfs, he ordered them to send him troops for a potential invasion of Larsa. Let's not forget, Larsa was still ruled by a very much alive, very active, and very war-hungry Rim-Sin I—in other words, a ruler not to be trifled with. Yet Siwe-Palar-Khuppak contacted him as well, proposing a potential sack of Babylon. Both Mari and Babylon learned of this, but despite Elam's duplicitous political behavior, Mari remained loyal. That loyalty would, however, slowly wane in time.

Babylon would prove instrumental in the crush of Elam in more ways than one. Siwe-Palar-Khuppak actually coveted Babylon for a very long time and constantly pressured Zimri-Lim to assist him in conquering it. At the same time, Hammurabi kept sending gifts and maintained a lively correspondence with the king of Mari, urging him to raise an army and help him defeat the Elamites. With some difficulty, Zimri-Lim managed to gather a sizable army of roughly 2,000 people led by two generals: Zimri-Addu and Ibal-pi-el (not to be confused with the king of Eshnunna; interestingly, that king, deposed by Zimri-Lim, was once an ally of Hammurabi and actively waged wars against Shamshi-Adad in order to crush his kingdom).

But even the combined armies of Babylon and Mari weren't enough to drive the Elamites away. Hammurabi then turned to the state of Yamhad and its own ruler, who had proven to be an ally of Mari having helped establish Zimri-Lim on his throne. At the time, Yamhad was ruled, interestingly, by its own Hammurabi, or to be more precise, Hammurabi I, son of Yarim-Lim. Interesting factoids don't end there, however; Yamhad, unlike Babylon, had no less than three rulers named Hammurabi, with the first being a contemporary of his Babylonian namesake. While he was getting Yamhad's help, Zimri-Lim contacted the country of Zalmaqum, which, in turn, sent some of its own troops to be led by the king of Mari rather than Hammurabi.

The Babylonian king continued rallying troops. The next ruler he contacted was none other than Ishme-Dagan, the son of the late Shamshi-Adad.

Interestingly, the roles of the rulers of these two countries, Babylon and Upper Mesopotamia respectively, shifted with the death of Shamshi-Adad. While he was alive, Hammurabi was his underling in a sense. Shamshi-Adad's son, however, ruled Ekallatum as almost a vassal of the Babylonian monarch. He sent his regiment of men to Hammurabi as a means of defeating Elam but did not do so all too willingly.

Interestingly, Larsa did not get involved in this war. Whatever the reasons behind this were, Rim-Sin joined no side, and now it was down to Elam and its vast land on one side, and a Hammurabi-led coalition of Babylon, Mari, Ekallatum, Yamhad, and Zalmaqum on the other.

Elam attacked first, taking a decisive victory at the city of Upi, where Hammurabi's forces apparently retreated. This occurred in 1765, and the very next year the Elamites went after Mankisum, another city on the Tigris with an important strategic position. The coalition army moved to a small border town called Namsum, unaware where the enemy would strike next.

The city of Hiritum turned out to be the next target of the Elamite king, as it lay close to Babylon-owned Sippar, and the conquest of this city would place the Elamite troops dangerously close to Hammurabi's capital. However, not only did the citizens of Hiritum defend themselves successfully against the invaders (with some help from Mari and Babylonian troops), but the coalition army managed to plunder and raid the Elam-owned territory of Eshnunna as well. Eshnunna, as it turned out, would prove itself to be a sore spot of Elam, as there's evidence of an internal struggle—Eshnunna locals were not entirely prepared to fight in the name of Elam's king. Some of them even went so far as to inquire Hammurabi for his direct help, swearing fealty to him. This city was by no means alone in its betrayal of Elam. A certain ruler named Atamrum decided to abandon Siwe-Palar-Khuppak and ally himself with Zimri-Lim. The Elamites began their retreat, sacking the city of Kakkulatum and moving to the city of Mankisum. This city was exceptionally close to Ishme-Dagan's city-state of Ekallatum, and conquering or even sacking it would deal a significant blow to the coalition. However, Mankisum would be the Elamite king's last advance, considering he had to turn his attention to Eshnunna, which erupted in a full-blown revolt. What began as a small throng of deserters now became an ersatz war of independence, which saw the rise of a local commoner into a ruler. This man was Silli-Sin and, much

like Sargon, is one of only a handful of examples Mesopotamia has to offer of non-noble men rising to power.

Silli-Sin was partially responsible for the utter defeat of Siwe-Palar-Khuppak. The king of Elam withdrew to the city of Diniktum and, realizing that he was beaten, sought peace from Hammurabi, a de facto leader of the coalition. Hammurabi showed goodwill at first, releasing the Elamite "ambassadors" which he had imprisoned within Babylon when the war started. However, the king of Elam again began to conspire against the Babylonian ruler by contacting Rim-Sin and Silli-Sin, asking them to form a coalition and sack Babylon. Illness, however, prevented Siwe-Palar-Khuppak from pressing these matters further, and he retreated to Elam to spend the rest of his days.

His retreat was in 1763 BCE, but it was the year prior, 1764, that Hammurabi proclaimed victory over all of Elam, naming the year in honor of the event. It's important to note that the crushing of Elam, the first major victory in his military career, was first and foremost a defensive war, and that it was more of an example of Hammurabi's diplomatic skills and a great deal of luck. The rebellion of Eshnunna and desertion of Atamrum were important pieces of this campaign, and had they not happened, Hammurabi might not have won as decisively, or even won at all. Having armies from four separate rulers—Zimri-Lim, Hammurabi I, Ishme-Dagan, and the unknown king of Zalmaqum—also helped a great deal, considering that Hammurabi's army simply wasn't enough to withstand the invasion of Elam.

Yet, even this war showed that Hammurabi wasn't a perfect diplomat. After all, he didn't secure the help of Rim-Sin, arguably an equal in power to Siwe-Palar-Khuppak, if not even more powerful. This fact alone was enough of a reason for Hammurabi to turn his weapons against Larsa, and with Elam officially out of the picture when it came to the political matters of Mesopotamia, nothing was there to stop him from doing so.

*Map of ancient Elam at the height of its power, with other important cities of the region*[xxxiii]

## Attacking, Sacking, and Conquering Larsa

Rim-Sin of Larsa was wise not to interfere in the war against Elam. After all, he had no real reason to go against any of the warring sides. Outright hostile action on Elam would leave his country vulnerable to anyone who wanted to attack him, and going against any of the coalition members would leave him open for Elam to plunder.

During Rim-Sin's time, Larsa reached its military peak. His brother, Warad-Sin, ruled Larsa until 1822 BCE, whereas their father, an Elamite named Kudur-Mabuk held dominion over the country called Yamutbal, with its capital city being Mashkan-shapir. If one takes note of the year, 1822, the conclusion arises that Rim-Sin had died a very old ruler, having dominion over Larsa that lasted a little over 60 years.

Rim-Sin was a warrior; he led campaigns against Isin, Uruk, and Babylon as early as the first decade of his rule. His most important victory, however, was the sack of Isin in 1794 BCE, two years before Hammurabi assumed the throne. The reason this particular victory is important to Rim-Sin was the history the two cities shared. Isin was a kind of "successor state" of the fallen Ur, though it didn't hold dominion over as many cities as Ur did in its heyday. Somehow, parallel to Isin, Larsa was slowly becoming more powerful, and the south of Mesopotamia was politically influenced by either one of these two, depending on who was more powerful at the time. That's why that particular part of Mesopotamian history is usually called the Isin-Larsa period by historians and archeologists. For all intents and purposes, Isin and Larsa were rivals vying for supremacy of the region, and with Rim-Sin, that victory would go to Larsa, albeit shortly.

The last ruler of Isin was Damiq-ilishu, and during his time, the city's territory and influence were reduced to its own walls. Even Hammurabi's father sacked the city years before Rim-Sin's decisive victory. However, it was Rim-Sin's win that echoed in the ancient world, considering he subjugated his major rival and elevated Larsa to the same level Shamshi-Adad's kingdom was at. Babylon and Larsa now shared a long, shaky border, and when Hammurabi took power, Rim-Sin had been established as a capable monarch.

In 1763 BCE, a year after Hammurabi's coalition won their war against Elam, the first sparks of hostility flew between Babylon and Larsa. Hammurabi tried repeatedly to enlist Rim-Sin's help against Elam, but the

ruler of Larsa never did so. In fact, he would write to the Babylonian king that his armies were at his disposal, despite no armies being dispatched. Fighting Elam was a difficult campaign, and Hammurabi did not forget Rim-Sin's lack of assistance.

With Elam out of the way, turmoil ensued, as there was no longer a higher power meddling in the affairs of the Mesopotamian kingdoms. But considering how soon armies began advancing against each other (it was probably in early 1763 that Hammurabi declared war on Rim-Sin) and the fact that the same generals, Zimri-Addu and Ibal-pi-el, were commanding Hammurabi's Mari native regiment, it's safe to say that the wars never really stopped, and that the invasion of Larsa was merely an organic continuation of the Elam campaign.

Rim-Sin himself didn't leave his capital, opting to have his brother defend the northern ends of his kingdom. Interestingly, this brother of his also had the name Sin-Muballit, like Hammurabi's father, and his station was at Mashkan-shapir, the same city Rim-Sin's father ruled from. The city, it should be noted, was meant to be the capital of the kingdom both Warad-Sin and Rim-Sin continued to rule. Him opting to stay in Larsa proved to be a bad decision; Hammurabi's coalition troops took hold of Mashkan-shapir, but didn't stop there. Very soon, the region of Yamutbal, also under Rim-Sin's control, felt the sting of the coalition, and not long after that both Nippur and Isin fell under Babylonian dominion. Each of these wins was detrimental to Rim-Sin. Losing Isin to a different ruler took away from Larsa's historic defeat of their rival, but losing Nippur, an important religious site, was a proper political blow which spoke volumes of how weak Larsa actually was before this new threat. The coalition reached Larsa's walls, and for the next six months, they laid siege to it.

Rim-Sin wasn't about to fight Hammurabi alone, and he tried to enlist the help of his ally, a king of a small city-state named Qatna. Even without this monarch's help, Rim-Sin amassed an army that counted in the tens of thousands. Hammurabi, on the other hand, had lots of allies. Mari's troops were still under his command, and the city he had conquered decades prior, Malgium, provided its own soldiers. Yamutbal's troops, which surrendered to Hammurabi a little after his siege of Mashkan-shapir, also went after Rim-Sin, and Hammurabi went a step further in asking Elam for help, the same Elam he had beaten to the dirt the year before (whose king was still alive!). Ishme-Dagan was also contacted for military help. In other words,

most of the cities in Upper Mesopotamia wanted Larsa to lose, and Rim-Sin's defeat was inevitable.

Different reports tell different stories of Larsa's last stand. The most accepted version is that the city ran out of food at some point and that Rim-Sin eloped, but was captured and brought before Hammurabi. An additional problem was the Sutean tribes which seized the opportunity to plunder the city during the siege. Hammurabi's troops, under one of Zimri-Lim's generals, took care of them and got appropriate awards for their deeds in the form of land or grain, or both. Hammurabi's treatment of Larsa was surprisingly far more humane than what other rulers might have done during his time. He did tear down the city's walls but decided against plundering the city itself, opting to maintain peace after his conquest. His subsequent acts in Larsa, from 1762 BCE onwards, were all done with the goal of peace in mind; he declared himself a legitimate successor of Rim-Sin rather than outright declaring Larsa his conquered territory, used his throne room to rule over the city, and even built temples in it. Subsequent temples were also built in Zabalam and Ur as a show of goodwill.

However, the citizens of Larsa might not have appreciated Hammurabi as much as he wanted them to. In fact, years after his death would see the rebellion of this city, but never a return to its glory days. Elamites wanted to use this situation to their benefit, even writing letters to Silli-Sin that they would invade Larsa should Hammurabi turn on Eshnunna. And while Elamite invasion of Larsa didn't happen, Hammurabi's turn on Eshnunna very much did.

Victory over Larsa was more than just an outstanding feat for Hammurabi, who had now firmly established himself as a conqueror and a cunning warrior. It was also a turning point in Mesopotamian history, signaling an end to the concept of the city-state. Before his conquests, most of the region was split into powerful cities, either fully or semi-independent, and each of them held sway over others at some point. Hammurabi introduced a new concept to this area, one of a unified empire with a single ruler and a somewhat improved model of the early examples of empires (Eannatum's kingdom, Sargon's empire, Ur III's territory, Shamshi-Adad's kingdom, etc.) which, as large and powerful as they were, didn't have the same sense of unity that remained during and after Hammurabi's reign. The disunion of city-states that was in full swing before the king of Babylon was ending with him.

*The foundation tablet of Rim-Sin of Larsa, between 1822 and 1763 BCE*[xxxiv]

# The Defeat of Eshnunna

Eshnunna was probably always going to be one of Hammurabi's targets at some point during his reign. Not only was its geographical position one of great strategic importance, but the region had similar cultural elements to Babylon itself, with the key difference being the city's titular deity, a lesser god known as Tishpak.

During the reign of Sin-Muballit, as well as the early years of Hammurabi, Eshnunna went from a powerhouse to a conquered patch of land in rapid succession. At one point, the ruler of this city was superordinate to even Shamshi-Adad.

Speaking of Shamshi-Adad, it was his death that made the countries of Upper Mesopotamia wage wars for supremacy. This is where the previously mentioned king of Eshnunna, Ibal-pi-el II, becomes a prominent figure. As early as 1776 BCE, he was pressuring Zimri-Lim, a relatively new ruler at the time, to become his ally, or more accurately his subordinate. Zimri-Lim only maintained superficial ties to Eshnunna, opting to maintain Mari's independence instead.

The back-and-forth between Ibal-pi-el and Zimri-Lim eventually led to conflict. Around 1771 BCE, the ruler of Eshnunna sought aid from the tribe of Benjaminites, who were revolting against Mari. Ibal-pi-el sent his troops directly to Mari to assist the rebel tribesmen, and Zimri-Lim had no other choice but to seek aid. Hammurabi responded by sending a regiment, though he didn't do any fighting himself. A treaty ensued between Eshnunna and Mari, with the former remaining in a superordinate position, but not to any noteworthy degree. Zimri-Lim's obligation to Eshnunna amounted to sending statues, servants, and standards as a sign of peace, as well as his promise not to help out Eshnunna's enemies; he didn't even lose any territory from this skirmish.

Elam, as mentioned before, was the force that crushed Eshnunna, with the help of both Mari and Babylon. However, Elamite rule wasn't taken too kindly by the local populace, and when Hammurabi plowed his way through Elam's defenses, the locals in Eshnunna began revolting to the point of an open and hostile rebellion. They swore fealty to Hammurabi and were enough of a problem to Siwe-Palar-Khuppak that he had to focus on them rather than pressing on with his own conquest. But it was in the aftermath of the rebellion where Hammurabi made a critical error—instead

of instating a ruler of his choice in Eshnunna, he let the people themselves decide. And the people decided to choose Silli-Sin.

While his name might sound silly (pun intended), Silli-Sin was by no means someone who could be described by that term. He was a commoner, or to be more precise one of the generals in the Eshnunna army. The people chose him for his distinction during the war, and this action itself was somewhat of an anomaly in contemporary Mesopotamia. Simply put, not a lot of commoners reached the position of king, and those that did were freakishly rare. But Silli-Sin nevertheless acted like a proper king. He restored Eshnunna's palace and appointed officials to the cities once held by earlier rulers. In fact, even some of Ibal-pi-el's earlier governors became his subordinates when he came to power.

The relations between Silli-Sin and Hammurabi weren't particularly good. However, the Babylonian monarch wanted to conquer Larsa at the time, so he had to somehow work out an alliance with Eshnunna (a territory he also wanted to conquer). The alliance demanded a treaty between the two cities, and Hammurabi kept sending drafts of this treaty which Silli-Sin kept refusing to acknowledge. Hammurabi continued trying to make Elam his ally throughout this period (a period very shortly after Elam's defeat by his own army), but it ultimately amounted to nothing.

One major breakthrough that finally united Eshnunna and Babylon, at least briefly, was the marriage of Silli-Sin to Hammurabi's daughter. But even this wasn't enough to ensure Hammurabi a smooth conquest of the northern cities. His old ally, Zimri-Lim, wanted more influence politically, but more importantly, he wanted his troops back from Babylon, the same troops that Hammurabi used to crush Elam and Larsa. With that in mind, Zimri-Lim wanted to ally himself with Eshnunna, going so far as to declare them the dominant power. Numerous gifts were exchanged between the two cities, and it was these actions that enraged Hammurabi enough to wage war against both cities.

Considering he no longer had the help of the Mari troops, Hammurabi enlisted new soldiers from Larsa. War preparations were brewing on both sides, with records showing that Silli-Sin wanted control of Shitullum, an important city on the Tigris River. His other noteworthy actions involved bribing Elamite rulers into ignoring the war, allowing for Gutians, his allies, to raid newly-Babylonian Larsa, and asking the northern rulers, all subjects

of Hammurabi, not to fulfill their obligations toward him. This, of course, included Zimri-Lim.

Sadly, we don't know too many details of the battle itself, other than the fact that Hammurabi ordered that roughly 2,700 spades and axes be sent to Eshnunna from Larsa. Even the purpose of these tools is unknown in terms of the war itself. However, the result was obvious—in 1762 BCE, Hammurabi crushed Silli-Sin, defeating the Gutians and taking control of Eshnunna.

However, it's important to note what kind of control Hammurabi actually exerted in Eshnunna. Sources suggest that he merely acted as an outside force, giving the city its independence in name only. He didn't incorporate the city into his kingdom and even had to quell a rebellion in 1756 BCE by means of flooding. The best example of his influence over Eshnunna was the fact that he incorporated the city of Mankisum into his kingdom, an important strategic point on the Tigris River that led into Eshnunna and was once under its direct control. And while Eshnunna did suffer some decline, with people moving out and settling into nearby villages, it didn't dwindle fully and was relatively stable throughout Hammurabi's reign and beyond. The fate of Silli-Sin is also unknown. While it's true that he was ousted and probably died soon after, it's unknown whether this happened during the war or at some point after it. Not a lot of details remain in Eshnunna itself, and the other nearby documents, such as those in Mari, don't have any records of this time period.

Nevertheless, this was an important win for Hammurabi. Despite not integrating Eshnunna into his realm, he gained free access to northern regions, allowing him to continue conquering to his delight. The next in line was Mari, but before that Hammurabi had other business in the north.

*Terracotta relief of the goddess Ishtar, Eshnunna, early 2nd Millennium BCE*[xxxv].

# Northern Kingdoms and Hammurabi

In terms of pure geography and overall historical and cultural backgrounds, what we call Northern Mesopotamia was vastly different from its southern counterpart. After all, the south of this region was home to some of the oldest, most esteemed cities such as Nippur, Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Kish, Larsa, Isin, Sippar, and many others. It was the birthplace of cuneiform writing and culture, as well as religion. In contrast, Northern Mesopotamia had cities that were nowhere near as old or as revered as these. Nevertheless, it maintained a bustling, busy life with its own urban centers, culture, and customs. One colloquial name used at the time for this region was Subartu, a name Hammurabi himself notes as one of the territories he pacified by conquest.

People in the north lived relatively similar to those in the south. They either farmed, fished, or herded cattle for their source of food; they built cities with high walls and temples with esteemed local deities; and they had king lists complete with year names and achievements. More importantly, they were just as involved in the political games of the region as their southern kinsmen.

During Hammurabi's time, this area was under the rule of Shamshi-Adad. As noted, he was such an important ruler that his death left a power vacuum that needed to be filled, and everyone in the north with aspirations of power sought to do this. But Shamshi-Adad didn't die without successors. His oldest son, Ishme-Dagan, was crowned king of his father's capital, Ekallatum. The younger son, Yasmah-Adad, was ruling over Mari before Zimri-Lim's "Reconquista" of this city. By the time Hammurabi began his first war efforts, Ishme-Dagan had become little more than a local prince, governing over Ekallatum and next to nothing else past its walls. Nevertheless, as a descendant of a great ruler, he still maintained a watchful eye on the events that happened around him. He was one of those northern rulers that saw the potential of Hammurabi and decided to put themselves under his patronage. Naturally, Ishme-Dagan didn't always agree with Hammurabi's decisions, but he nonetheless helped out whenever the need arose in Babylon. For example, he sent troops out to help Hammurabi in his fight against Elam in 1764 BCE and maintained relations throughout the war with Larsa. This help of his was probably due to the fact that Hammurabi "forgave" him for an unsubstantiated accusation of stealing

goods and riches from Marduk's temple to bring to Elam. Another result of Hammurabi "forgiving" Ishme-Dagan for his alleged transgressions was the fact that his generals were allowed to participate in Hammurabi's secret council meetings, a courtesy the Babylonian monarch didn't even extend to Zimri-Lim of Mari, a far stronger supporter whose army he still held within his city's walls. Zimri-Lim's representatives notified their ruler of this, and the relations between the two kings began to deteriorate with little to no chance of recovery.

During Ishme-Dagan's absence while he was in Babylon helping out Hammurabi with his war efforts, the Elamite general Atamrum (also a supporter of Hammurabi at one point) conspired with local noblemen and plotted to instate Ishme-Dagan's son Mut-Ashkur as the new ruler of Ekallatum. Mut-Ashkur was not of age to rule, and after Elam's demonstrable defeat, Ishme-Dagan returned to his hometown and reclaimed the crown. Strangely, his son wasn't eliminated for participating in this coup, as he still succeeded Ishme-Dagan on the throne later on.

Hammurabi was an ally of Ishme-Dagan, but this relationship they shared slowly began to crumble. Ishme-Dagan did not like how Hammurabi treated the king of Mari better than him, which his messengers made clear to the Babylonian king. In response, he made it clear to them that it was his decision who was to be treated in what way, and that Ishme-Dagan was under obligation to treat Zimri-Lim as a superior. But there was also the question of Atamrum. Prior to this exchange with the messengers of Ekallatum, Hammurabi had sent Atamrum troops numbering close to 300 men. A small number, but a noteworthy one nonetheless. Ishme-Dagan's messengers also made this clear to Hammurabi, but he maintained that the number was insignificant and that Ishme-Dagan was still a friend and ally, which he likely didn't believe himself nor cared about.

Speaking from a position of pure pragmatism, Hammurabi could not afford to send any troops to Ekallatum. After all, it was 1763 BCE, and he was already knee-deep in fighting Larsa. Wasting troops on a nothing-ruler like Ishme-Dagan was beneath him. However, the bigger reason why he didn't do this was the relationship he had with Mari. Zimri-Lim was a ruler on par with Hammurabi in terms of manpower, wealth, and experience. Providing troops that would go after Mari would have been political suicide at that turbulent time, so he kept his distance. Whether he considered Zimri-Lim a proper ally or friend is debatable at best.

Ishme-Dagan, nevertheless, continued to look for ways to fight against Mari and remove himself from Hammurabi's influence. He sought help from Eshnunna, which responded positively but ultimately did nothing of substance to help. The ruler of Ekallatum had far worse problems than Mari or Babylon, however, and they included the distant Zagros-based kingdom of Turukkum and its ruler Zaziya. Namely, Zaziya kept on pestering Shamshi-Adad's successor until, at one point, he proposed a treaty. Naturally, the treaty was a trap, and before he knew it, Ishme-Dagan had to face the sacking of his native Ekallatum, loss of countless goods, livestock, grain—basically anything the invaders could carry with them. Beaten, and without proper support, he once again went to Babylon and sought help from Hammurabi.

But it was evident Hammurabi had had enough. During his campaign against Eshnunna, which ended in a decisive victory, he also sent a contingent of troops (that numbered in the tens of thousands) to sack and "pacify" a whole slew of minor cities in the north. Hammurabi would boast that he held sway over Ekallatum, Zalmaqum, Burunda, Kakmum, and Turukkum. Some of these cities should sound familiar. Besides Ekallatum (which Ishme-Dagan and his descendants continued to rule even after this intervention by the Babylonian monarch), Zalmaqum was another city that had provided help against Elam several years ago. Turukkum, of course, is the city which Zaziya ruled, and even prior to becoming the vassal of the Babylonian king, he praised Hammurabi's skill during the skirmish with the Elamites. Hammurabi persisted in pacifying the region by means of conquest, and in the same year that he sacked Mari, he took direct control of Qattara, one of the few cities that actually fell under Ekallatum's rule at the time. He deposed its king Ashkur-Adad and placed his brother-in-law on the throne instead. This man was named Aqba-Hammu, and just judging on his name alone, you can tell that he was a willing subordinate to Hammurabi. He had even expressed as much by way of his title, which was "servant of Hammurabi," and even referred to himself as such when corresponding with his wife, Iltani. This loyalty extended down to his son Re'um-El as well.

Based on his actions in this period, it's safe to say that Hammurabi sought power, among other things, and while he might not have directly included the sacked cities into his kingdom, he certainly could directly influence their decisions to his benefit. Much like Eshnunna, other cities of the north

now had puppet rulers who were at Hammurabi's beck and call, and the few that dared to revolt did so at the expense of their lives.

*Ishme-Dagan's name stamped onto a brick found at Ur, currently in London*[xxxvi].

# Mari's Submission

It was, after all, inevitable. After several intense years of intrigue, bloodshed, partnerships broken, and enemies befriended, it was only a matter of time before Zimri-Lim and Hammurabi would cross swords (though not literally, as the two rulers never met face to face).

But before moving onto Mari's fall, it's important to know how Mari rose to where it was. A seven centuries' old city by the time of Zimri-Lim, Mari was an important port located in the middle of the Euphrates valley. Due to this position, it was influenced culturally by several different traditions, most notably those of Babylon and Assyria. In fact, Mari was such a beautiful, awe-inspiring location that Shamshi-Adad chose it as one of his three capitals. This was where he instated his second son, Yasmah-Adad, before dying and leaving the city to its own fate. And its own fate would have the locals rebel, remove Yasmah-Adad from power, and place Zimri-Lim at the top.

Zimri-Lim claimed to be the son of Yahdun-Lim, hence the similarities in their names. Yahdun-Lim's dynasty had ruled Mari before so this familial connection would have given Zimri-Lim a credible claim over the city. However, his father was likely Hadni-Adad, a Banu-Simaal tribesman with no real relation to the native Mariotes. This makes Zimri-Lim similar to Silli-Sin, insofar as neither of the two really came from royalty, yet they took the throne of a major city and distinguished themselves as rulers. Zimri-Lim, in particular, succeeded here, as one can easily put him shoulder to shoulder next to other powerful rulers of the period, such as Eshnunna's Ibal-pi-el II, Larsa's Rim-Sin I, and even Babylon's own Hammurabi.

When it came to Hammurabi, the two rulers maintained a lively correspondence and, at least in the beginning, showed signs of goodwill toward each other. All three of Hammurabi's known sons, the older successor Samsu-iluna and the younger sons Sumuditana and Mutu-Numaha, visited Mari regularly, and entire houses and areas had to be emptied out to accommodate them.

But there was one sore spot which would prove to be the reason behind the later clashes of Babylon and Mari, and that was the city of Hit. Hit was a bitumen-rich place on the Euphrates River, and it was right between the borders of the territories the two cities controlled. Hammurabi used bitumen for his boats, and controlling Hit would allow him easier access to this

material. Mari, on the other hand, held Hit in high regard due to the river's verdict ritual. Namely, if someone was accused of a particular crime, they (or someone representing them) had to perform a task in the Euphrates to prove their innocence. Normally this would include swimming a distance while holding a heavy stone, or swimming a certain distance under the surface of the river. Whatever the task was, the outcome was simple—if you were to bob your head out before completing the task successfully, or if you drowned on the spot, you'd lose and be proven guilty.

In short, one city wanted Hit for spiritual and judicial reasons, the other for practical ones. While Elam was still in power, they presided over cases such as these, and the Elamite king decided in favor of Mari, which Babylon didn't like. However, he couldn't just up and invade Hit, as he had far more pressing matters to tend to, such as defeating Elam and removing its yoke upon the Mesopotamians. For this, he needed Mari as an ally (as well as Larsa and a few other cities, which we covered earlier), and this meant either solving the Hit issue post-haste or shelving it for later. His pressure of Zimri-Lim to relinquish claims over Hit never bore any fruit, as the Mariote leader vehemently refused to do so. A quick treaty was proposed by Zimri-Lim, urging Hammurabi to withdraw his claims until they had dealt with Elam, against which they were now waging full-on war. Hammurabi managed to postpone the Hit issue rather than addressing it, and Zimri-Lim, after consulting diviners, decided not to release his claim of the city either.

During the wars against Larsa, which followed shortly after the defeat of Elam, Zimri-Lim demanded his troops be returned to him, which Hammurabi kept delaying. The two mistrusted each other more than ever, and this was reflected in their foreign policy. Hammurabi received word that his ally Atamrum was assisting Mari behind his back, as well as similar news regarding the cities of Yamhad and Zalmaqum, both allies of Mari and Babylon at some point. The entire thing escalated when each monarch tried to ally himself to Silli-Sin of Eshnunna. Silli-Sin was in a predicament, considering he was the husband of Hammurabi's daughter but that Zimri-Lim willingly accepted his superiority if he were to strike Babylon with him. Hammurabi saw this as the perfect reason behind declaring war on both Eshnunna and Mari, deeming them traitors. Eshnunna was dealt with in 1762 BCE, and nothing was stopping Hammurabi from marching toward Mari and snatching it. Zimri-Lim kept a close eye on Babylon's operations, having planted spies in the court, and just to make sure of his potential

victory over Hammurabi, he consulted oracles and got a favorable response. A favorable response that was, as it turned out, horribly wrong.

Hammurabi attacked Mari from the south and the north, prompting Zimri-Lim to take defensive measures. A border-city of Hanat was sacked soon after, by two generals who hated Mari to the bone, no less—those were Mutu-Haqdum and Rim-Adad. Naturally, Hammurabi had a massive army, though most of it probably contained people living in the near vicinity who didn't abide by Zimri-Lim's rules.

No records survive of the final battle between the two cities, but the results are well-known—Hammurabi conquered Mari in 1761 BCE and beat Zimri-Lim, of whose last years on this Earth we know next to nothing. Mari was sacked, with precious treasures, statues, and other objects taken away to Babylon, and its private archives purged. This particular move, probably done for political reasons by Hammurabi's henchmen, proved most disastrous for modern archeology and history, as we're missing the crucial last five months of Mari's correspondence with both Babylon and Mari's allies like Eshnunna and Yamhad. The last time Mari would be mentioned during Hammurabi's reign was two years after the king's conquest of the city. Namely, in 1759 BCE, the Babylonian king had to squash a revolt of the Mariotes, and he did so in the most brutal way which included burning the palace and other buildings to the ground. Other than that, Hammurabi's treatment of Mari remains unknown to us.

*Remains of Zimri-Lim's palace in Mari, today's Syria*[xxxvii].

# Chapter 3 – Reign of Hammurabi: Babylon During His Reign, Relations to Other Cities

## Hammurabi's Babylon

As stated, Babylon was little more than a minor city in the north of Mesopotamia before and even during much of Hammurabi's reign. It wasn't even particularly old, at least when compared to others. Four centuries is by no means a small amount of time, but there were even older northern cities than that. Mari, for example, had at that point existed for 700 years.

The fact that we know very little of Babylon's ancient history might additionally highlight how unimportant it was to the contemporary people of Mesopotamia. Even during the first five rulers of the First Babylonian dynasty, the city was merely a successful port. As such, it wasn't strange that outside forces frequently coveted it. Not much could distinguish Babylon from other cities in terms of culture, religion, and literature, considering they worshiped more or less the same pantheon as everyone else, wrote in cuneiform, and had the same institutions to nurture these aspects of their culture. However, ethnically speaking, Babylonians were really descendants of Amorites, and Amorites, like Akkadians and other minor peoples surrounding them, were Semitic, but not the same branch as the Semites already there. In fact, Hammurabi probably never saw himself as "Babylonian" in an ethnical sense, merely as an Amorite.

Him being an Amorite wasn't the only distinguishing feature of Hammurabi as a ruler. His conquests, all done within the span of half a decade, put him front and center. Naturally, he didn't stop with his conquest of Mari, as he had moved on to several minor territories in the meantime. Roughly by his 38$^{th}$ year, he had stopped warring and focused on his territories in a more legal, judicial sense; scholars and researchers typically take this year as the one when he commissioned his now-famous Code of Laws, though this can't be claimed with enough certainty. For a short time, his kingdom was vast, and it was about to be unified by a single set of civil laws.

But Hammurabi did more than conquest in his golden years. In fact, he had spent a good amount of time even prior to the defeat of Elam building and rebuilding temples in various cities. He did the same with canals, including his "magnum opus" in this respect, the canal called "Hammurabi is

abundance" which stretched for roughly 160 kilometers or 99.4 miles and spanned several major cities—Ur, Uruk, Larsa, Isin, Nippur, and Eridu.

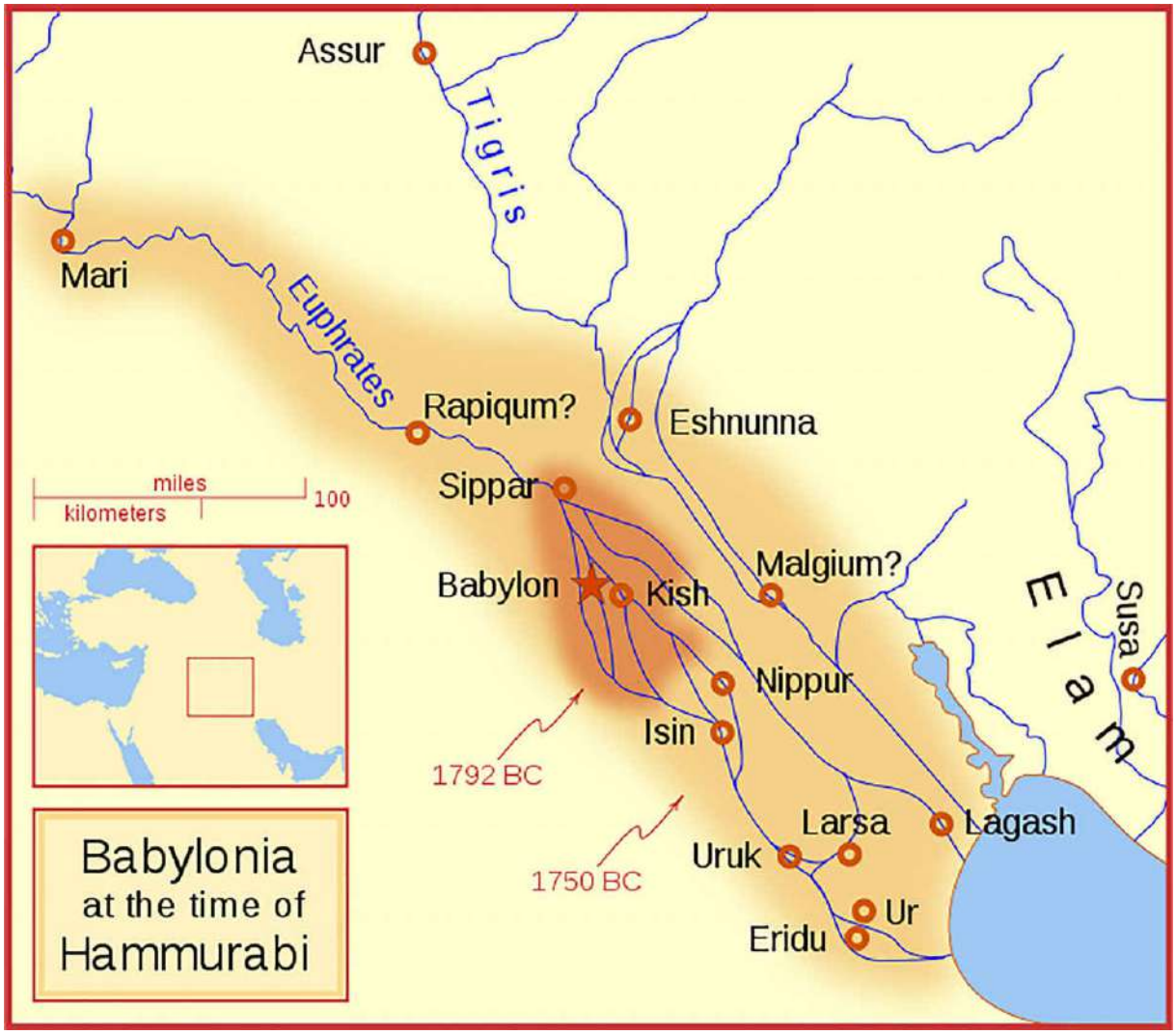
Not only did this canal (and others that followed) boost his own case with the local populace, but it also made everyone wealthier. More irrigation meant more crops, which meant more food. Also, there was now an easier way to transport goods and people across Hammurabi's vast network of vassal cities and new territories. Just like others before him, Hammurabi made sure to quell the worries of his people by providing them with food and faster mobility.

Babylon was now a center of a major empire. Other powerful centers of power, such as Larsa, were under governors Hammurabi himself appointed. For example, Larsa itself (which Hammurabi all but renamed Yamutbal, the term used for that entire general region) had a Babylonian man called Sin-Iddinam reign over it, and his roles were numerous, largely of a legal nature regarding territorial and land disputes. Even he had subordinate officials that did his bidding, indicating a decent governing structure under Hammurabi's effectively centralized rule.

The reason his rule is only "effectively" centralized instead of outright centralized is simple. While Hammurabi is effectively the progenitor of a totalitarian, autocratic state, the cities he held under control still didn't feel like anything other than their own entities. People living, for example, in Ur or Uruk never saw themselves as Babylonian during his reign, but exclusively as citizens of their native burg. The reasons for this are rather simple, and they largely revolve around the fact that the politics of city-states was several millennia old at this point, and that it was still too early, historically speaking, to have anything closely resembling what we today call a nation state or a country. Religion also played a strong factor in this, as each city had their own titular deity they prayed to. Hammurabi took note of this, of course, and had richly rebuilt and furnished several such temples during his long reign, including temples as far south as Ur.

Of course, Hammurabi had other plans outside of strengthening the religious centers of other cities and instating his vassals as rulers. He was also concerned with having a decent standing army, and conscriptions were in full swing during his busiest five years of non-stop combat. He would punish deserters heavily and reward loyal soldiers handsomely. There were even sets of laws that dealt with soldiers leaving their land to substitutes to tend to it.

Speaking of laws, Hammurabi's principal concern was to bring justice to his new lands, and this had to include some kind of unified code of regulations, or at least a rough estimate of what his subjects could expect from his own brand of justice. However, this will be covered in more detail in the chapter dedicated to Hammurabi's Code.




*Map of Babylon and nearby cities under Hammurabi's rule*[xxxviii]

## Babylon and Other Cities

Based on what historians have learned from various sources—year names, cylinder seals, correspondences, and even personal names—it's safe to say that Hammurabi's position regarding other cities was, at best, pragmatic and, depending on the situation, at worst duplicitous. The truth probably lay somewhere in the middle, and a definitive answer to this cannot be discerned from the sources we currently have.

If we take the most powerful city-states at the time of not only his reign but his early life as well—those being the kingdom of Shamshi-Adad that included Ekallatum, Mari under either Yasmah-Adad or Zimri-Lim, Elam under Siwe-Palar-Khuppak, Eshnunna of Ibal-pi-el II, and Larsa under Rim-Sin I—we can assume that none of them held any deeply rooted loyalty or kinship to the other. An ally of Mari today could turn on it tomorrow and flock to Babylon, only to go back to Mari the next year and attack Babylon, which would, paradoxically, ally itself to Mari as well. Alliances lasted less than a year, at times even less than a month, and backstabbing was practically the norm. Interestingly enough, this is also the case with minor rulers, such as those of Northern Mesopotamian cities that were either conquered by Hammurabi in his early years or swore loyalty to him after his sack of Eshnunna and Mari.

However, Hammurabi was also known as someone who would regularly rebuild cities, after he had conquered them, of course. He held temples of various states in high regard, and his rebuilding of temples in Ur is an example of this. While it's absolutely possible that this move was purely political on his end and meant to buy favors from the locals, it's also well-known that Hammurabi was very religious, and was serious about illustrating that everywhere. He favored Marduk as the titular deity of his hometown of Babylon, but he also held Shamash, the sun god, in great esteem, as well as the goddess Ishtar.

Naturally, he built (and rebuilt) more than just temples. He would also relieve citizens of their debt and establish new taxes, allowing for some leeway to the people who owed a lot to the local temples and nobles. Next, he made sure everyone grew in wealth by investing in irrigation and repairing existing canals. One perfect example of his treatment of conquered territories is what he did to Larsa. Aside from its walls, he did not sack the city, nor did he exact bloody vengeance upon the citizens.

Instead, he ruled from that city during his campaign and invested lots of man-hours and wealth in repairing it. The very next year after the sack of Larsa was dubbed peaceful, despite the military campaigns that followed shortly after.

In short, Hammurabi treated his own territories with care and employed meticulous hard work to elevate them, whereas he saw his neighbors as pawns to be used for expansion. How he thought of his allies will be further explored in the following chapter, but it’s safe to say that, at least in some respects, he didn’t differ much from his contemporaries.

# Chapter 4 – Hammurabi's Character: Physical Appearance, Relations with Other Rulers, Glimpses of His Personality

## What Did Hammurabi Look Like?

The short answer is we don't know.

However, we're not here for short answers. Visual representations of Hammurabi exist, though there's only two of them, and they don't really help with this issue. The first of these comes from the bas-relief on top of the very Code of Law that bears his name and, well, the laws themselves. Here we see Hammurabi standing before the sun god, who is seated and providing him with the royal insignia. The same praying pose of Hammurabi is found on the other famous source, a limestone votive inscription probably from Sippar and contemporary to his reign.

Both of these depictions show a very bland, very typical figure of a ruler praying to a deity from whom he's receiving the regalia. The facial features are nothing remarkable, with little proper distinction other than the massive beard, which was common in depicting rulers at the time. In fact, the design of Hammurabi on both of these monuments is grudgingly similar to other reliefs found on monuments dedicated to, or commissioned by, other rulers. In other words, the representations of Hammurabi here are "stock photos" of regular kings during the time of the First Babylonian dynasty.

For a long time, a particular bust of a man, now displayed at the Louvre, held the title "Head of Hammurabi." Sadly, this rather detailed sculpture predates this ruler by several centuries, meaning there was no earthly way that it could represent him.

One clue as to what he might have looked like comes from his Amorite origins. Amorites are described in various sources, including the Hebrew Bible, as looking very European, with fair skin, blue eyes, and reddish hair, and they were apparently very tall. Egyptians would represent them as having slender faces and eagle noses, but the white skin and tall body build remained a constant. If we were to take Hammurabi as a typical Amorite, that's probably what he would have looked like. But again, until we find a

definite depiction of Hammurabi from a reliable, contemporary source, we can never be sure.

*Votive monument to Hammurabi, between 1790 and 1750 BCE*[xxxix]

# Hammurabi's Personality – Dealing with Others

Irritatingly, it's not just Hammurabi's face that we cannot pinpoint; it's also his attitudes, his personal philosophy, his character, and patterns of behavior—in a word, we don't really *know* him.

The easiest action to undertake is to read the sources from his contemporaries, for example, the letters that were sent by either his emissaries or emissaries of his allies or even opponents. The problem with this is the very nature of those letters. It was probably never the case that the king's true words and intentions wound up in a diplomatic letter. He would probably dictate the crux of the message, and his scribes would shift it to fit the purpose of the letter, probably even omitting crucial, if not damning details. Of course, Hammurabi was by no means the sole example of this practice—in the same way, we can't know the real character of Shamshi-Adad, Rim-Sin, Ibal-pi-el, Zimri-Lim, Silli-Sin, Ishme-Dagan, Samsu-iluna, or anyone that Hammurabi came across. Official letters were heavily edited, and would often contain phrases that sounded more "official" and grandiose. In addition, a scribe would never present his ruler in a negative light, nor would he talk about a rival ruler in an entirely positive light either. That makes these letters as evidence to kings' characters rather unreliable and, to put it bluntly, biased.

What we can talk about are the probable, most likely aspects that made Hammurabi what he was. From his reactions to certain situations, such as delays of treaties, lack of military aid, or even dealing with legal issues of the land, we can discern a few slivers of information. Apparently, Hammurabi was heavily involved in the matters of the state, maybe even more so than other rulers. This would make him a diligent, attentive, engaged, and cunning ruler. His cunning can also be discerned in how he dealt with massive diplomatic problems, such as who to support and in what way. He knew how to play his opponents, and wasn't afraid to use those tactics to his advantage. His entire correspondence with either Zimri-Lim or Ishme-Dagan fits as the perfect example of this.

A detail that would appear somewhat often would be that Hammurabi was prone to outbursts of anger, such as when Ishme-Dagan pestered him about his relationship with Zimri-Lim or his reactions to the latter allying himself with his enemies. While these events can be taken as exaggeration and even slander (most of these accounts come from Zimri-Lim's ambassadors and

serfs while in Babylon and attending some of the private councils), it's not that far off the mark to assume that Hammurabi would have an emotional moment here or there.

Hammurabi also saw great virtue in religion, and this included the practice of haruspicy, or reading animal entrails to predict the future. He was one of many rulers who would consult auspices and temple priests to try and predict the outcome of a situation by sacrificing a goat and reading its entrails. Again, this practice might come off as typical of any Mesopotamian ruler, especially some that had a direct impact on Hammurabi such as Zimri-Lim, but with Hammurabi, the religiosity of the practice struck harder, or so it seems at least.

In terms of his private life, it's known that he had numerous wives (of whom we don't know a single name) and at least three children. The oldest, Samsu-iluna, would inherit his empire and would probably be the last Babylonian ruler to maintain such a vast territory. All of his sons went to Mari on various occasions, which showed how committed Hammurabi could be when it came to alliances with other states (or, to be precise, how committed Hammurabi appeared).

# Chapter 5 – The Code of Hammurabi and Early Mesopotamian Law

Without a doubt, there can be no discussion of Hammurabi without talking about his biggest gift to the world, his famous Code of Laws. This monument has been discussed, dissected, cited, disputed, and discussed anew by experts of so many various fields that it's not an exaggeration to call it one of the most studied pieces of ancient history.

# Discovery of the Code

In the winter of 1901 and 1902, a team of French explorers led by Jacques de Morgan was doing excavations at Susa, the ancient capital of Elam. One of the archeologists in their group, an Egyptologist named Gustave Jéquier, found the massive stele containing these laws broken into three easily adjustable pieces. After they reconnected it, the team took it with them, and with some effort, another member of the expedition named Jean-Vincent Scheil translated it and published said translation in 1902. Since then, various other translations appeared, and there are even replicas of the stele in universities around the world.

It should be noted that this stele is by no means the oldest surviving code of laws from ancient times. Three laws that we know of predate it, and they include the Code of Ur-Nammu, the Laws of Eshnunna, and the codex of Lipit-Ishtar, and they were found in Ur, Eshnunna, and Isin respectively. However, the age of the code isn't the only detail about it which has modern misconceptions surrounding it, but we'll discuss that further at the end of this chapter

## The Appearance of the Stele

The stele containing the Code is made of black diorite and stands a little over 2.2 meters, or 7.5 feet tall. At its top stands a bas-relief of Hammurabi in a praying position, while seated before him is the sun god Shamash, providing him with the royal insignia and thus letting us know that the ruler was chosen by the gods to impose justice upon the land. Some speculate that the god might actually be Marduk, but the iconography of the seated deity aligns more with Shamash, hence why it's widely accepted that he's providing Hammurabi with his regalia. On top of that, even in Sumerian days, Shamash or Utu was the god of justice; therefore, it makes more sense that he would be on the stele. To top it all off, Hammurabi actually worshiped Shamash as much as he did Marduk and even rebuilt his temples across his vast kingdom.

This bas-relief of the two figures only takes up roughly a fourth of the stele. The rest is filled to the brim with columns of cuneiform writing, detailing probably close to 300 laws. We say "probably" because a notable portion of them is missing, erased by a later ruler in an attempt to add their own (a practice Hammurabi was aware of while he was commissioning the steles). Despite this huge gap, it can safely be said that this monument is one of the longest ancient texts to be translated, and is also one of the most intact. If we compare, for instance, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it took multiple different sources from several ancient cities, sometimes hundreds of miles away, to make sense of the missing parts of the epic, and it is still missing a huge chunk.

*The Code of Hammurabi; the top shows the Babylonian king standing before the sun-god Shamash*[xl].

# The Composition of the Code

Possibly the most interesting part of the Code is how it was comprised. It doesn't necessarily read as just a code of law if you take its prologue and epilogue into consideration.

Speaking of, the Code is usually divided into three distinct sections. The two mentioned in the paragraph above are the prologue and the epilogue, both written as poems and both having an exalted air to them. The mid-section contains the laws, and they deal with various, largely civic topics. Historians usually divide them up further by their stated topic or purpose, and those are as follows: legal and judicial proceedings, property offenses, real estate issues, financial deals and arrangements, inheritance and marriage (in particular involving women), assault, professional fees and responsibilities of those receiving them, agricultural issues, hiring rates, and slavery. Naturally, a huge portion of laws, some 40 or so in total, is missing between those dealing with real estate and those dealing with financial arrangements, so we can't exactly say what they contained, though judging by the proximity of the topics they would fit between, it's highly likely that they dealt with those two as well.

# Social Stratification of Babylonians

Before moving onto the Code proper, we should address an important detail regarding social classes in Hammurabi's Babylon. The typical three classes of people listed in various sources are awilum, mushkenum, and wardum. Each of these is somewhat problematic to explain without understanding the context of Babylonian life, and even then, it's somewhat hard to discern. Wardum were slaves, but not in the typical sense. A slave could, theoretically, buy or earn back his freedom, and the term could even refer to a man indebted to a different man for a short time span. Mushkenum is possibly the most difficult of the three to explain, as it represents free men who worked at the palace, but who could get the king's property in usufruct without keeping it (in other words, they could work on it, reap its goods, but couldn't destroy or damage it). Awilum would be landowners who did not have to rent anything nor rely on any higher authority for what they owned. These last two classes are problematic in the sense that there wasn't a clear distinction between them or at least none that was explained in the sources we have available to us. This is frustrating because the laws listed in the Code heavily depend on what level of social hierarchy the accused or the accuser was a part of.

# Chapter 6: Dissecting the Code

As stated, multiple translations were used throughout the last century when it came to Hammurabi's Code. The one we'll be using is the version translated by Leonard William King in 1915. Though newer and more detailed translations exist, this one has been cited in English scientific literature the most.

# The Prologue

Hammurabi's Code begins with a lengthy poem which speaks of his achievements, his favor with the gods, and the lands that he rules over. Its opening lines are roughly as predictable as one expects. At first, he invokes the gods of Mesopotamia, including "Anu the Sublime" and his "Anunnaki" (i.e., the children of Anu), Bel ("lord of Heaven and Earth"), Marduk, Ea, and many others, mentioning how they made Babylon great upon their arrival. Of course, those selfsame gods chose Hammurabi himself as the rightful—and righteous—leader of all "black-headed people" between the two rivers. It was, according to the gods, his task to be "like Shamash" and to "enlighten the land" for the continuing well-being of humanity.

Invoking the will of the gods in order to justify the ruler's right to govern the land is a staple of ancient Mesopotamia. With these lines, Hammurabi mentions, in almost a single breath, how the gods chose his city, Babylon, to be the greatest out there, how they chose Marduk to be the most exalted among the Anunnaki or the Igigi (the two might be synonymous), and—of course—how they chose Hammurabi himself to act as the arbiter of justice in said exalted city in the name of the said exalted god. It's important to bear in mind that Anu was the father of all creation in ancient Mesopotamia, so Hammurabi is effectively saying that he was chosen by existence itself to propagate justice to Man.

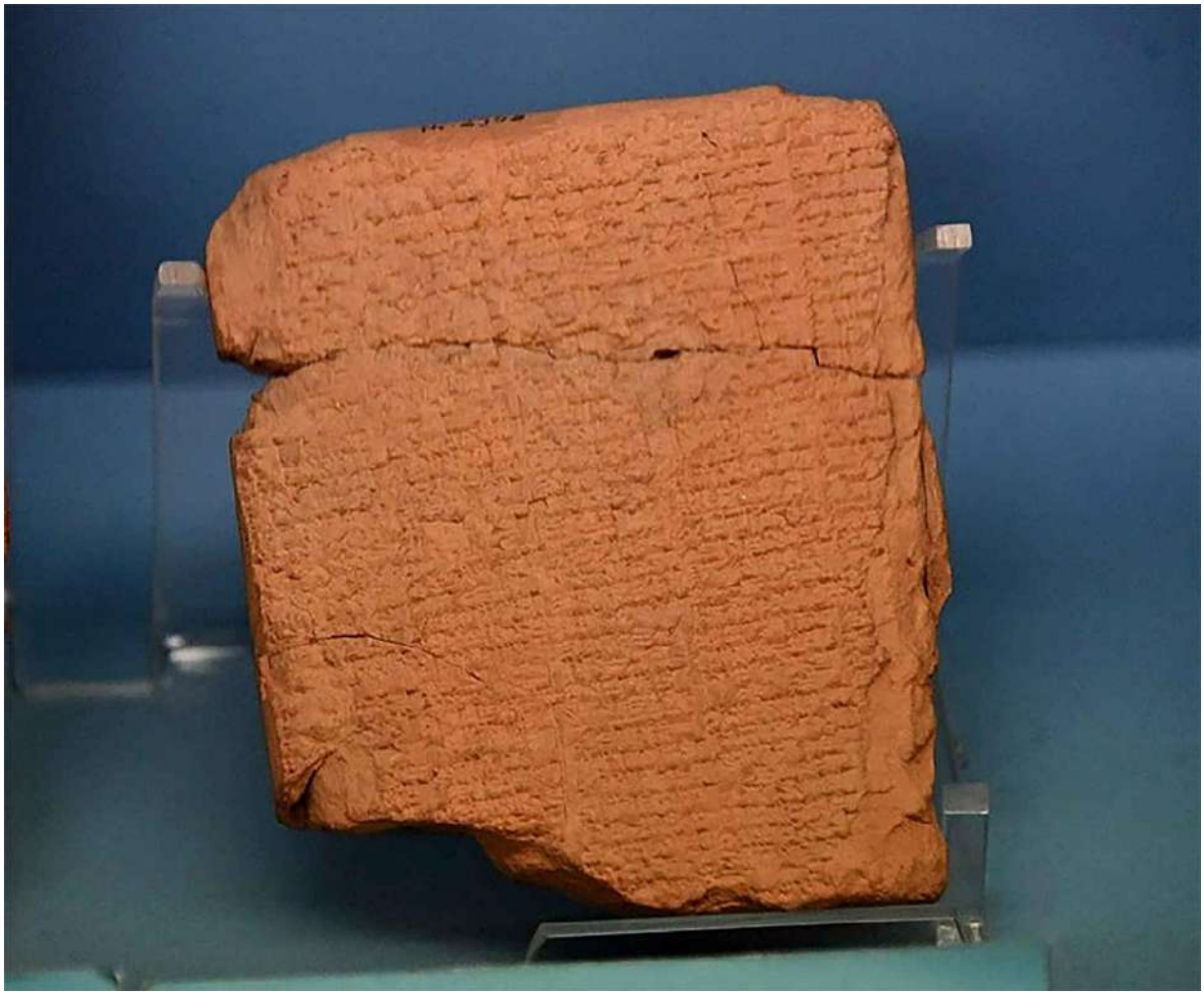
But Hammurabi remembers to be just humble enough not to appear arrogant. He stresses that his laws are here "so that the strong should not harm the weak" and that his goal, aside from ruling over the black-heads, i.e., Mesopotamians (though earlier, this was referring to Sumerians specifically), is to bring righteousness to the land and to destroy the wicked. His goal, in other words, is a noble one.

The sheer mountain of text that follows details everything he had done up to that point in his life. He had done repairs on many temples and canals. He then enriched and rebuilt cities such as Nippur, Eridu, Babylon, Ur, Sippar, Larsa, Uruk, Isin, Kish, Kutha, Borsippa, Dilbat, Kesh, Lagash, Girsu, Adab, Akkad, Ashur, and Nineveh, and even lists all of the temples within them, including the deities that inhabit them. It's also not surprising that he styles himself "the king of four quarters" and "the king of the land of Sumer and Akkad," as this was the title many rulers had before him, both those that rightfully deserved it and those who merely tacked it on to bolster their

ego despite not having the territory to match said title. Hammurabi did, indeed, unite "the four quarters," with the exception of a few independent cities, so his use of the title is technically just.

Not being one to understate his importance in bringing justice, Hammurabi ends his prologue with these words:

*When Marduk sent me to rule over men, to give the protection of right to the land, I did right and righteousness in . . . , and brought about the well-being of the oppressed.*



*Law code of Hammurabi, a smaller version, terracotta from Nippur, 1790 BCE, currently in London*[xli]

# The Code Proper

The version used for this book contains 282 laws, of which roughly 40 are missing. The best way to look at them has to be one by one, in succession, as they often build atop the law that preceded them.

The first five laws deal with the judicial process in Babylon, and the very first law tells us an important factoid about legality throughout human history:

*1. If anyone ensnare another, putting a ban upon him, but he cannot prove it, then he that ensnared him shall be put to death.*

Yes, this law right here deals with the presumption of innocence. Even back in ancient times, lawmakers knew that a person had to be assumed innocent until proven guilty, and it's no wonder that this law is the very first Hammurabi wants us to see.

It's important to pay attention to this particular law, considering how frequently the current political climate seems to shun the notion of "innocent until proven guilty." This postulate has been around since the earliest of days, and it's no wonder that the right to a fair trial stands as one of the universal human rights. Naturally, the punishment for this transgression is rather harsh, but then again, it's no different than most of the laws within this Code, including the very next one:

*2. If anyone bring an accusation against a man, and the accused go to the river and leap into the river, if he sink in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river prove that the accused is not guilty, and he escape unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser.*

Again, we have the river verdict ritual in action, the same that the Mariotes used within the city of Hit. The compensation of either party is rather large and strict—whatever the case, one of them will die, and the other will claim the property of the dead man.

Considering the time period, capital punishment wasn't out of the norm, and considering that both of these laws deal with the presumption of innocence (in their own way, of course), it just goes to show how seriously Babylonians took this concept.

The next two laws are an example of how one law builds upon the other, and are merely the first in line of dozens that do so throughout the Code:

*3. If anyone bring an accusation of any crime before the elders, and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if it be a capital offense charged, be put to death.*

*4. If he satisfy the elders to impose a fine of grain or money, he shall receive the fine that the action produces.*

Once again, we're dealing with the presumption of innocence, but for the first time, we get a glimpse of a potential legal proceeding, i.e., a certain council of "elders." In ancient Mesopotamia, most legal and military matters had to be decided on by a set of two councils, one made up of elders, another of younger, yet prominent men of the city. And once again, we see capital punishment as the resolution of falsely accusing someone of a crime. However, we also see a resolution if the opposite happens, i.e., the council will provide the accuser what he's owed.

The next and final law dealing with judicial proceedings deals with the judges themselves:

*5. If a judge try a case, reach a decision, and present his judgment in writing; if later error shall appear in his decision, and it be through his own fault, then he shall pay twelve times the fine set by him in the case, and he shall be publicly removed from the judge's bench, and never again shall he sit there to render judgement.*

Babylon did indeed have judges, and these were usually governors or lieutenants picked by the king himself. They would largely deal with smaller matters that didn't require Hammurabi's attention, but considering how often he would micromanage them, they had to do an impeccable job. Otherwise, they would be severely punished, though, as we see here, not by death, but by way of compensation and a layoff.

These five laws lay the foundation of Babylonian legal thought and are not as specific as the ones that follow. They do serve as a shining example of how committed Hammurabi was to maintaining truthfulness and justice, and especially truthfulness *in* justice.

The following twenty laws deal with property offenses, and each come with their own separate category. For example, laws 6-14 speak of theft, be it of animals, goods, or even people. Stealing from the temple or the court would bring death upon the thief, as well as the man who got stolen goods from

him (6); the same fate awaited someone who bought silver, gold, male or female slaves, sheep, oxen, asses, or anything else from anybody without a witness or a contract (7). Stealing cattle from the temple would force a thief to pay thirty times the sum, yet it was only ten times for stealing from a free man (8). Naturally, death awaited him if he couldn't provide the payment. It was a bit more complicated if someone lost an item, for instance, and someone else found it. Law 9 states that the person claiming that a merchant sold it with witnesses at hand must prove so by bringing the said witnesses and the merchant. The owner was also ordered to bring his own set of witnesses, in case they could identify that the stolen property was really his. The judge was to examine who was telling the truth. If the merchant was the thief, he was killed, and the man received his property back, whereas the person who bought stolen goods received some money from the late merchant's estate. The next three laws, namely 10, 11 and 12 (13 is missing) expand on law 9. If a buyer of the stolen item couldn't get any witnesses, he was the one guilty of thievery and got the death sentence. If the presumed owner was the one lying, the same fate awaited him as well. However, each of the aggrieved parties had roughly half a year to get witnesses, and should any of them fail to do so, they were dubbed the culprit and were put to death.

Law 14 is a bit different from these, though it also deals with stealing. It demands that any thief of a "minor son" must be put to death. It isn't as detailed as the laws before it, but it fits well with the theme and has the appropriate punishment to match the others.

Stealing was a crime; however, stealing from the temple was a particularly egregious offense. Temples were considered houses of the gods, and the statues there were considered as gods themselves, manifested on Earth. As such, taking temple property was effectively stealing from the gods themselves, and nothing less than a death penalty would follow. The same punishment went for anyone who received stolen goods as a gift or who bought them.

Of course, these goods included sheep, cattle, oxen, donkeys, grain, statues, slaves of both genders, and just about anything of value. However, we see a discrepancy in terms of class; a thief was to pay less to a free man than he was to the temple or the court, meaning that justice, indeed, favored the wealthy. However, it still didn't favor the perpetrators.

Once more we see the element of bearing false witness, but this time in terms of lost and found property. It also deals with providing witnesses and setting dates for their eventual inclusion into the legal process.

Runaway slaves are the topic of the following six laws. The 15th law states that people taking slaves of either gender from the court or from a free man outside of the city would get the death penalty. The same went for those who received runaway slaves and did not let the proper authorities know that they did; keeping runaway slaves was just as bad as stealing them from others (16).

Of course, some rewards were given to the folks who found runaway slaves and brought them to their masters. Each person would get two shekels of silver as a reward for this act (17; it's important to note that a shekel is an old unit of measurement whose name is currently used as that of Hebrew currency). But there were also times when slaves would refuse to name their old masters, which would prompt an investigation (18). The palace dealt with these, and if the master was found, the slaves would be returned to him. Naturally, keeping these slaves within the house of the person who found them still resulted in death (19), which is a bit redundant of the law, considering that an earlier law had the same contents that issued the same punishment. But there was an area where the finder of the slaves could get away from that punishment. If a slave was to run away from this man, all he had to do was swear an oath to the owners that they ran off, and he was safe (20).

This is an interesting set of laws because it's the first to deal with slaves directly, and it also shows us a little of how Babylonians viewed slaves. Helping and colluding with a runaway slave, much like liberating one without the express permission of their master, resulted in death, yet bringing back a slave could get a lucky Babylonian an award from the master. What appears as a loophole is apparently also part of the law, namely that the slave could run away and that the person whom he ran from merely had to swear to the owners that he did so. It's difficult to imagine that this particular loophole wasn't used to liberate slaves at the time—after all, you only had to swear on your life that the slave overpowered you and fled, and you're scot-free.

The final five laws of this section deal with break-ins and robberies. Law 21 states that if a person was to break a hole into someone's house to steal something, he was killed right then and there at the hole itself. Robbers that

committed their crime without having to “put holes in walls” were also put to death according to the law following this one. But with law 23, we see what happens if the thief was somehow not caught. The whole local community would then offer reparations for the stolen goods, and all the person who lost them had to do was swear the amount stolen under oath before the gods. For any slave stolen, law 24 states that the community and someone else unspecified (due to the damage of the code, this particular section of the text is missing) pay one mina of silver to this person’s relatives and close family (a mina is another unit often used in ancient Babylon, amounting to 1.25 pounds or 0.57 kilograms). Curiously, law 25 deals with fire, but not with the loss of property to flames; rather, it mentions people stealing things during the process of putting out the fire. A person who stole anything during this horrific event was, rather severely, thrown into that same fire as punishment.

Most of these laws can be linked to what was already said about stealing. As it was established, taking someone’s property was punishable by death, and the same went for people doing it while breaking into someone’s estate. An interesting detail here deals with not knowing who the perpetrator is. While a section of these laws is missing, it can safely be inferred that the community was to help the victim via compensation, be it for material goods or slaves. That sounds like an interesting way of preventing robberies —if everyone in a district had to pay for what one person did, nobody would dare commit a crime, lest they had to either pay the man back anyway or, if found out, die for their crimes.

It’s also odd how specific the law about robberies during house fires is. Considering its specificity, it’s safe to assume that these kinds of fires (and these kinds of break-ins) happened often and that something had to be done about it, legally speaking. Naturally, the fitting punishment is about as cruel as any other thus far.

Real estate is the following topic, and within that, a massive 27 laws deal with land tenure alone. According to the first few of these laws, a general or a common soldier did not have gone to war by himself, as he could hire a mercenary. However, failure to compensate the mercenary after the war would result in death and property transfer to the man he hired.

Laws numbered 27, 28, and 29 deal with men captured during the war. If they were to return, the man maintaining their property was to give it back. Alternatively, the man’s son or mother could maintain it instead. 30 and 31

deal with the "term limits" of property maintenance—should the original owner return within a year, he would get his original property back from the man he hired, but if he came back after three years, the other man got his property. Then we have 32, which oddly stipulates that a man purchased by a mercenary in battle could not buy his freedom by giving away his property. He was either to pay for it himself or to allow the temple or the court to buy him out. Two more laws past this one deal with mercenaries and prisoners of war, but they are too broken to understand properly.

Laws pertaining to the property given by the king were pretty clear when it came to selling the property to others. Law 35 states that anyone who purchased sheep or cattle that the king had given to his chieftains had to lose his money. The next law deals with the fields, gardens, and houses of anyone, be they nobles, free men, or men working under quit-rent conditions. None of these could be sold under the law. Indeed, law 37 specifically states that any contract tablet made including the contents from the previous law was to be broken, which meant annulment of the whole purchase. Think of it as tearing up a legal document today, or shredding it asunder in a paper shredder. The person who sold these was also to lose his money, with the goods returned to the proper owners.

Oddly enough, nobles and free men couldn't outright sell their property, and if they tried, they got their money back. They would have similar difficulty when it came to assigning tenure of their property to a female relative, such as a wife or a daughter—unless they bought additional property, or if they sold it to an official. Law 38 says just as much, highlighting that the tenure of fields, gardens, or houses could never fall to the wife, the daughter, or to anyone else outside of the house. This attitude, however, changed if the field, garden, or house were something he had bought and held as property. In other words, any new material or "mortgage" possessions were fair game in terms of giving them to female relatives. The same applied when it came to selling said goods to members of the royal family or other noble subjects. Both of these acts—assigning them to the ladies or the nobles—are described in laws 39 and 40.

Indeed, property was no small thing in Hammurabi's Babylon, hence why it was so difficult to either obtain or sell it. It's also not surprising that the royal court handled most of the matters of private property, in particular, the property lent by the king.

The laws continue onward, talking about putting up fences in fields (41) and how to deal with people who either tilled a field poorly (42), failed to do it outright (43), or failed to make an infertile field arable after having offered to do otherwise (44). We can see that most of those laws stated compensation as punishment, both in grain and in forced manual labor. In other words, if you don't plow the field, you'll pay the field owner's fee and be forced to plow it again anyway.

The 45th law interestingly deals with damages caused by forces of nature. A man could rent his field to a tiller at a fixed price and receive this rent, but the bad weather (provided by the gods, of course) could wreck the harvest. The tiller was then held responsible for the damage.

This was somewhat of a dire situation for the tiller because he effectively had to suffer for something outside of his power, such as a storm or any kind of rotten weather destroying the crops. Tillers would, however, benefit if the owner didn't get a fixed rental for his field (46); in that situation, they would split the grain amongst themselves. Owners of fields also had no right to complain if other tillers plowed the field other than the one he hired (47), as he would nevertheless get the grain.

Storms come back in the 48th law, but this time as a beneficial circumstance. Namely, if a person owed something, and the grain he grew to repay the debt was destroyed by bad weather, drought, or even poor soil, his debt was forgiven to him by the creditor, and the "debt-tablet," i.e., the official document dictating the terms of his debt, was to be "washed…in water." That year, the tiller's property would be rent-free.

Forgiving debts and loans was the bread and butter of every Mesopotamian ruler as early as the first Sumerian kings. Having a law specifically addressing debt write-offs is a strategic plus, as it lets the subjects know that there are situations beyond their control which provide a good excuse for not paying debt.

The last four laws of this section deal with obtaining money from a merchant and returning said money in grain the merchant was to plow, but it has an interesting detail to it:

*49. If any one take money from a merchant, and give the merchant a field tillable for corn or sesame and order him to plant corn or sesame in the field, and to harvest the crop; if the cultivator plant corn or sesame in the field, at the harvest the corn or sesame that is in the field shall belong to the*

*owner of the field and he shall pay corn as rent, for the money he received from the merchant, and the livelihood of the cultivator shall he give to the merchant.*

*50. If he give a cultivated corn-field or a cultivated sesame-field, the corn or sesame in the field shall belong to the owner of the field, and he shall return the money to the merchant as rent.*

*51. If he have no money to repay, then he shall pay in corn or sesame in place of the money as rent for what he received from the merchant, according to the royal tariff.*

*52. If the cultivator do not plant corn or sesame in the field, the debtor's contract is not weakened.*

An average person would think that Mesopotamians couldn't grow corn, considering it is native to the Americas, and they would be right—the "corn" in these laws refers to grain in general. From these laws, we can see that a field owner had various ways of repaying a merchant for the lent money, almost all of them referring to the grain the very field he lent the merchant produced.

Laws numbered 53 through 58 all deal with irrigation negligence and unauthorized grazing, or in other words, irresponsible dealings with property. The first four let us know that flooding a field, be it the accused man's field or that of his neighbors, was an offense that required material compensation: he either had to provide grain or pay a certain amount of grain for each measure of land destroyed by water. Alternatively, he had to sell a vast portion of his property and share the earned money with the man whose field he had flooded. The remaining two laws deal with shepherds having to pay penalties for their sheep grazing without permission on private property.

59-65 are the last laws before a major break in the text, and they concern orchard cultivation. We learn that cutting down trees in orchards of others is punishable by way of payment (59), that working on the field for five years meant that the owner and the gardener would split the property (60), and that empty patches of land also became property of the gardener eventually (61). We also learn that the gardener had to compensate the owner should he have planted grain on his land and cultivated it (62), that the owner had to pay the gardener should he turn infertile land into an arable one (63), that gardeners got one third of produce for their service (64), and that he had to

pay an estimate of produce from other orchards as compensation for the wasted produce in the orchard he was working on (65).

After the notable break, the next law is marked by the number 100, as agreed upon by most historians. This and the following 26 laws all concern financial arrangements within Babylon and are further subdivided into three categories. The first deals with loans, interests, agreements between merchants, and what women innkeepers were allowed to do when loaning goods.

Laws 100 and 101 are clearly linked and deal with interest upon meeting or failing to meet a certain agreement. However, the first part of the 100th law is missing, so we can't be sure what it was about specifically. Laws 102-107 are rather clear, though. Law 102 states that a broker had to repay the debt to the merchant who had entrusted it to him should the broker lose what he borrowed. The very next law mentions an exception to this, and it deals with a thief. The broker who lost his money to robbery had to swear an oath to the gods that this had happened to him, which would render him free of having to pay back the merchant. Moving on to law 104, we learn that for each transaction having to deal with grain, wool, oil, or really anything else, the broker had to take a receipt from the merchant with the exact amount that he had borrowed. After the repayment, he also had to get a receipt to verify the whole deal. This means that both men were bound by law to provide each other with documents about their transactions. A failure from the broker to get a receipt is outlined in law 105, whereas law 106 speaks of what happens if the broker tried to deny the receipt that was agreed upon. The merchant had to swear an oath, and the broker had to pay him three times what he originally agreed on. Law 107 gives us the other side of this argument. In case the merchant was the one cheating the broker, he had to swear an oath as well, but if he still denied his misdeed, he was to pay six times the original sum.

Losing money was a major deal, and anyone who did so had to repay it, especially if said money was entrusted upon them. However, again we see a loophole, one of "swearing unto God that an enemy took it," which allowed for freedom. One way to ensure the fairness of trade was for the agent, who was reselling or redistributing the goods of the merchant, to write down everything and provide the earned amount to the merchant, alongside the receipt with the amount. This would probably be one of the earliest

examples of legalizing the use of financial records, an element which would make trade just as important as food production or raw material excavation.

The laws also clearly take into account the potential errors or problems that can arise between the trading parties. An agent had to take the receipt, and the merchant had to acknowledge it. Otherwise, the penalties, while not as cruel as the ones of earlier laws, were devastating for their livelihoods—after all, paying three or six times of any sum is not a laughing matter. Yet again, we see the element of swearing oaths to the gods and invoking divine justice. However, there's the added element of "witnesses and judges." This might not be clear from these laws themselves, but the oaths could have been deemed false by the judges and the public court. What the punishment for this was isn't clear, as it wasn't "codified" on this stele.

The following four laws, intriguingly enough, deal with women as tavern keepers or wine sellers, and they are a mixed bag of good and not-so-good when it comes to dealing with these ladies:

*108. If a female tavern-keeper does not accept corn according to gross weight in payment of drink, but takes money, and the price of the drink is less than that of the corn, she shall be convicted and thrown into the water.*

*109. If conspirators meet in the house of a tavern-keeper, and these conspirators are not captured and delivered to the court, the tavern-keeper shall be put to death.*

*110. If a "sister of a god" open a tavern, or enter a tavern to drink, then shall this woman be burned to death.*

*111. If an inn-keeper furnish sixty ka of usakani-drink to . . . she shall receive fifty ka of corn at the harvest.*

These laws are, if anything, pretty cut and dry. If she overprices the drinks, she'll end up drowning. If she harbors the enemies of the state, she dies. And if she was to provide a certain amount of drink (60 *Ka*, in this case; Ka or Qa is a unit of liquid measurement which equals roughly 1kg/2lbs of water in a cube whose edges are 10.2cm/4in long) on credit, she was to be compensated for it during a harvest.

But the most interesting of these laws is 110, as it deals with a high priestess opening or drinking within a tavern. It's a common misconception that women were treated almost like slaves during these times in history. While they weren't as revered as men in higher positions of power, they were far from being at the bottom. The best examples are the various

classes of priestesses that made up the royal court. They would often serve as wives or sisters of gods, and as such played vital roles in sacred rituals such as marriages and child-rearing. They were also allowed to own land, and even before Babylon's ascendance to power, were even able to reach positions of power as "kings."

All of this is important to keep in mind when discussing law 110 of Hammurabi's Code. A priestess was a position not to be taken lightly, and any woman who held the title wasn't allowed to stoop to such a level as to open a tavern or an inn since it was a more earthly place where people regularly got drunk. And speaking of getting drunk, a high priestess who was intoxicated, or even inebriated, was one that stomped on the sacred beliefs of old Babylonians. Sacrilege was never punished by anything short of death, and even the highest classes weren't immune to this, whichever of the two genders they were. Women enjoying the tavern life, however, must have been a frequent phenomenon during Hammurabi's reign, considering the law pertaining to this activity earned a spot on the stele. More laws dealing with women specifically will come, but not just yet—we still have debt and deposits of grains and other goods to cover.

Debt and one's obligation to it are covered in laws 113 to 119, with law 112 deviating from this group of laws and the one preceding it, as it deals with the safekeeping of money and what happens if one who should return it doesn't. In terms of the laws that follow, a man who was owed grain wasn't allowed to take it by himself, or else he was to return the amount he took and annul the debt (113). He was also not allowed to falsely accuse someone of debt and was to recompense him for every sum he took (114). Things also didn't look good for the man who was owed money or grain if the person who had to return it to him died (115), because the case would automatically be annulled. It then becomes interesting when social class is made part of the debt; an imprisoned man who was under debt, if he were tortured or mistreated and died thereafter, could cost his imprisoner either his life (if he was born a free man) or an amount of money (if he were a slave to begin with). Social differences, therefore, played a major role in how the law was implemented, and the lower the class of the "victim," the less severe the penalties.

Slavery is covered in the last three laws of this subsection. Law 117 deals with the length of time an indentured slave was to serve his master. A man could sell either himself, his spouse, or his children of either gender, and the

time they had to work under their master could not go over three years. Naturally, not everything was that "good" for the slaves; law 118 states that the new master could sell these new slaves to a different master for money and that the slaves had no real say in it, nor did their family members. But then comes law 119, which deals with maidservants who bear children to the men of the house. If a man was to sell one to a buyer, the buyer got an immediate refund, while the maidservant became free of her plight.

Three years of forced servitude sounds like a decent deal, considering how slaves were treated in Egypt or ancient Greece, for example. However, slaves also had the misfortune, as we can see, of being resold to others, so technically that could reset their three-year "contract." It's another spectacular loophole, but this time, it worked against the everyday folks, unlike the ones regarding oaths to gods.

The practice of depositing money or grain was just as common in this time as banking is nowadays. The seven laws that follow detail the process completely. Law 120 notes the consequences of what happened to someone who either denied the service of housing grain, stole the grain he agreed on housing, or if there was any damage done to it. The owner had to swear an oath before the gods, and the person housing the corn had to compensate him—in grain, of course. The next law states that the storage rate of every five Ka of grain was to be paid one gur; since gur, as a unit of measurement, is mentioned more prominently in later laws, we will leave out its explanation for now. Law 122 states what a person had to do beforehand when he or she decided to put something up for safekeeping. Naturally, it involved drawing up a contract and having a witness present. The consequences of not having a witness or a contract are evident in law 123—should the person claim safekeeping of the grain (or gold, silver, or really anything of value), without evidence, the courts could just dismiss them in favor of the person doing the uncontracted safekeeping. Then we have law 124, which covers what happens if a safe keeper denied his service, despite the client having a witness to their deal. In this case, the safe keeper had to pay the full price to the aggrieved party. Then there's laws 125 and 126 which cover thieves and safe kept property. In case a thief or a robber stole something from a safe keeper, it was the duty of that same safe keeper to compensate the owner of the property. However, the owner himself had to do his best to find the thief and retrieve what was stolen. The following law states that there are men who might lie that they lost property. If they were

to swear an oath before the gods, even if they had no property stolen to begin with, they would be compensated as if they did.

These laws, as we can see, take into account the destruction of the storage space, denial of service, theft (all under law 120), the price for storage (121), the process of acquiring storage space involving witnesses and contracts (122), and the consequences if any of the two were lacking (123); denial of service even with existence of witnesses and the contract also entailed penalties (124), making these four laws essentially one major law separated "thematically." Law 125 deals with theft of property left for safekeeping a bit differently; compensation is a major part of it, but the owner of the house was still under obligation to locate the thief and try to reclaim his property thusly. While this law seems to be rather sober and well-thought up, the very next one, 126, presents another major loophole in Babylonian law. Again, we see the infamous "oath before God" section, and the phrase "even though he has not lost them" rings ominously. We cannot understate that the possibility of this law being misused must have been frequent, if not even commonplace. At any time, anyone who owned property legally could lose it to a random stranger, and all it took was for the stranger to claim before the gods that the property of the owner was actually the property "stolen" from him. Hammurabi's Code was spectacular, but it was clearly far from perfect.

The next section is by far the longest, containing 67 separate laws, all dealing with one common subject—matrimony and everything regarding family. It won't surprise you to hear that a good portion of these laws talk about women and children, which means that this section is possibly the biggest collection of laws regarding the fairer sex in ancient Mesopotamia.

The first two laws, 127 and 128, deal with false accusations and what makes a marriage valid. Law 127 states that if anyone was to "point a finger," i.e., slander someone's wife or a "sister of a god" (temple priestess) without proof, he was to be branded. The law that follows clearly states that the wife who "has no intercourse" with her husband isn't really his wife, legally speaking.

The first law clearly favors women, though of course it specifies priestesses and wives. Branding a slanderer might not be as severe as a death penalty or confiscation of property, but it was a difficult punishment on a whole different level. If branded, a man would effectively become an outcast in his own community.

Now the latter law is interpreted a bit differently, as it also translates to "*if a man take a wife and do not arrange with her the proper contracts, that woman is not a legal wife*"; whichever is correct, it openly tells us how a couple was to marry legally. Once more we can see that women enjoyed a substantial level of justice under Hammurabi and his contemporaries.

The four laws that follow deal with adultery in general, and an eagle-eyed observer can notice a familiar motif in one of them. When reading law 129, we learn that someone's wife who was caught cheating had to be thrown into the water tied up, as was the case with the man she cheated on her husband with. However, the husband had the right to pardon his wife if he wanted to. Law 130 is more inclined to women, as it states that a virgin (either a child or an unmarried soon-to-be bride) who was violated in her home by a man other than her potential husband was innocent of the matter, whereas the man who did that to her was to be sentenced to death. A man could also accuse his wife of adultery, but, as law 131 points out, if she wasn't caught cheating, she was to swear an oath to the gods and go about her day free of any charge. Bizarrely, law 132 states that if a wife was accused of adultery by others, she had to jump into the river for her husband despite her potential innocence.

The first two of these laws are standardly brutal; however, both have a silver lining in terms of pardons (129) or exemption from blame due to the particular circumstances of the case (130). Law 131 again brings up the idea of "swearing/taking an oath," and this time it's the wife who can reap the benefits of a loophole and evade a crime.

The interesting law is 132, just because of how openly it works against the wife, despite her blame. The court of public opinion must have been a powerful tool even back then, considering that this law prescribes her to throw herself to her death to maintain the honor of her husband. This would be one example of a woman properly getting the short end of the legal stick in Babylon, and one of the rare ones where a completely innocent woman could die simply because others pointed their finger at her.

Four more laws follow that specifically deal with the wife, this time talking about her remarriage and when it can come about. Wives of captured husbands had to take care of the estate, and any woman who went to a different man was to be thrown into the water (law 133). However, she had zero blame if the house had no maintenance arranged in advance (134), and if she was to bear children to a different man in this case, she would return

to her first husband (upon his own return from war imprisonment, of course) while the children remained with their biological father, i.e., the head of the house the wife went to during her husband's POW days (135). The wife also had full right not to return to her husband if he were to desert his city and thus betray it (136).

The topic of divorce, which covers laws 137 to 143, is a spectacular section, as it uncovers the practice of marriage annulment dating back several thousands of years before our time. And right off the bat, we see that the ladies, under divorce, had it good if they had children with the man who wanted to divorce them. The first law, law 137, states that if a man wanted separation from a mother of his children, whether she was his wife or concubine, he was to give that woman her dowry as well as a part of the field, garden, and property. That way she could rear children more easily. Once these children grew up, they got a portion of this dowry and these lands. She received an amount equal to that of one son, and after all of that, she could marry whomever she wanted.

That's right—even back then, the wife was properly compensated, even after the adulthood of her children. The following three laws dictate what a man should give his divorcee in case she had borne him no children: it was either an equivalent of her dowry from back when they married (138) or a single *mina* of gold in case no dowry was given (139). However, that amount decreased to a third if the man divorcing said wife was a free man (140).

The following two laws deal with neglect on the part of either partner. If the wife had been neglecting her duties, the husband could either set her free without the dowry or, alternatively, keep her around as a maidservant while bedding a second wife. Law 141 is pretty clear on this: wives weren't just marriage partners. They had their obligations, and not keeping up with them resulted in the penalty outlined above. Consequently, according to 142, a husband who misbehaved toward a hard-working wife must, if proven guilty, pay her the dowry back and let her go live with her original family. Sadly, if the woman had proven to be the one who neglected her duties during this accusation (143), she was to be thrown into the water.

A few of the past laws referenced having a second wife. This is discussed in further detail with laws 144-149. The first of these deals with a wife's maidservant bearing her husband children. If she did, the man wasn't allowed to take on a second wife. 145 then states that, should a husband

bring in a second wife after the first one was unable to bear him children, he was not to treat this second wife on an equal level with his first. The first, after all, commanded authority over all others. Next, we have law 146, which deals with a maidservant bearing children and assuming equality with the first wife. The husband wasn't allowed to sell this mother of his children, but he could keep her around and "fit" her among the other maidservants of the house. The following law makes it clear that the husband could sell the maidservant if she bore him no children. Law 148 is just as favorable to the first wife as the ones before it, wherein a woman racked with an illness cannot be sold or removed from the house. The husband had to take care of her until the end of her days. However, the last in this line of laws stipulates that this woman racked with illness doesn't have to stay and that the husband ought to compensate her for the dowry provided by her father, whom she could return to if she wished after the compensation was over.

The first two laws are pretty clear on the authority of the first wife—the husband was not to force her out, nor could he take a different wife if she was to bear him children. In the rare case that the wife couldn't give birth, she would not be merely discarded, as her authority in the house was still above that of a concubine, even if this concubine gave birth to children. If a concubine that bore children assumed an equal status with the wife, the husband had no right to sell her, as he was to keep her around as a maidservant. Compensation once again plays an important role in terms of the original wife leaving the household for one reason or another.

With these laws, we see clearly how different classes were treated differently by the judiciary system. Even if the maidservant was to rise above the wife, she was still treated worse. Time and time again, it was wealth rather than gender differences that subjugated people around the globe and throughout history.

The three laws that follow (150, 151, and 152) all deal with what the wife had to do with the estate after her husband died. She was not to pay any of his debt (though had to pay her own), and the estate didn't exactly go to her, but rather to a single son of her own choosing. And yes, that meant the other sons could end up homeless because of a single decision. Law 153 is, however, a pretty gruesome record of how female murderers were treated. A woman who had killed her husband for another man would end up impaled on a stake; what's more, her lover was also to receive this same

punishment as an accomplice. Murder is a heinous crime, but impalement as punishment only comes up this one time in the entire Code (if we exclude the 40 or so laws the stele doesn't have and whose contents are unknown). This crime must have been significant to the judges of Babylon considering how uniquely it was dealt with.

Next came incest and how the law treated it. And judging by the following five laws, it was an offense punishable more severely than today. For instance, law 154 states that a man who sleeps with his daughter should be exiled from the city. The following law speaks of a father defiling his son's wife after the two had already had sex. The father's punishment was binding and subsequent drowning. Next comes law 156, where it deals with the father defiling a virgin before his son had any chance of bedding her. He was to pay her half of a gold mina and compensate her for the dowry she brought. After this, she was free to marry a different man. Law 157 very harshly states that anyone who sleeps with his mother after she had slept with her husband, i.e., the father of the perpetrator, is to be burned alive alongside the mother. The final law of this section, law 158, deals with fathers catching their sons having sex with their main wives, the ones that had children. The son who had committed the act must be exiled from the house.

So, we have exile, drowning, monetary and material compensation, and burning. Interestingly, law 156 specifically references the corruption of marriage by means of incest. In essence, this is actually two laws being broken rather than one, yet the punishment—that of compensation—is far lighter than that of the following law, where both participants of incest end up in flames. But then again, the victim (the wife of the man's son) is technically not family by blood, so the incest in this case is purely one of "spirit," so to speak.

Most of the laws that included marriage up to this point had dowry mentioned in some fashion. The three laws that come next deal with what the future husband and his potential father-in-law arrange prior to the marriage itself. Namely, if the man were to refuse marriage because of a different woman, the father got double the agreed-upon sum for the gifts the man brought (159); consequently, if the father refused his daughter's hand to the man despite the agreement, he paid double the amount of the gifts back to the man (160). The last in the line of these laws is a bit odd, since it includes "slander by a friend" and has the bizarre line "the man's friend

cannot have the woman as his wife." The gist of this is that the father still cannot refuse to give away his daughter despite what the man's friend said to them.

Eight laws of this section, 162 to 169, are about inheritance. They are very thorough and detailed, letting the Mesopotamian family know who gets what in case of estate division. According to law 162, if a woman gave birth to sons and died, they were the ones who inherited her dowry (from the time she married her husband), not the father. The following law deals with a woman who bore the man no sons. In case the father of the late wife returned the marriage settlement to the husband (which the husband had to provide before the marriage), then her father was entitled to her dowry, not the husband. However, according to the following law, should the father not have enough to pay for the settlement, this amount was subtracted from the dowry. What remained of the dowry then belonged to the father of the late wife. The next law, 165, deals with the father's death and his inheritance. Usually, a father would choose a "favored son," i.e., the one who would inherit the family name. This son could get a present from his father, such as a garden, a field, a deed, or a house. In case of the father's death, this son got his promised share first. The rest of the estate was then equally divided among all sons, him very much included. Minor sons and their wives are addressed in law 166. In case this son found no wife when the father died, the brothers set aside a little money as a marriage settlement in order to secure a wife for him. Naturally, they split the rest equally. Now, most of these laws deal with a parent dying and the children splitting the estate. But what happens if a father dies, but has children with two wives? Law 167 states clearly that it was the sons who divide up the dowries but only of their respective mothers. The father's estate was divided equally among every individual son, irrespective of who his mother was. The last two laws, 168 and 169, deal with a father wanting to disinherit a son. The first of these laws states that the son could not be disinherited if it could not be proven that he had broken any major law. However, law 169—surprisingly—doesn't immediately leave the son without any inheritance just because of a committed crime. The father was obliged to forgive his son the first time. Yet, if the son committed a crime again, the disinheritance had to happen.

In short, a father had no claim of the land the mother had as her dowry, and it could only go to either her offspring or her own father, depending on the situation. The sons also had to settle who got what from their father while

he was still alive before they moved on to any kind of land division. Wifeless sons were to be helped out, in a sense, during the inheritance process, and sons from other mothers were to inherit the dowry first, and then divide the rest of the estate equally with their half-brothers.

The final two laws of this section deal with exclusion and disavowal. In both of them, the son had a chance of having his innocence defended, highlighting the strength of the concept "innocent until proven guilty." Interestingly enough, the latter of the two laws provides room for the son to repent and get a second chance, a rare occurrence in Hammurabi's Code and a welcome addition to it, considering the severity of other penalties for crimes that were either harsher or lighter than this one.

Children were also covered by the law, especially children of slaves and concubines. A man could have children with maids and slave women, but if he were to acknowledge them as his own during his life, they also got part of his estate after his death (170). If the opposite were true, the maid and her children were set free, and the wife remained on the estate which she could use, but not sell due to her children inheriting it (171). But it's law 172 that somewhat complicates the whole matter—if the wife had no dowry, she was to receive a portion of the land equal to that of one of the sons, but if the children were to conspire against her and it was proven that she was innocent, she was to remain in the house. And, on top of that, if she chose to leave, she had to leave what her husband had gifted her during marriage and gain a new dowry from her father as she prepared to be remarried. It's amusing to see all of this additional info crammed into a single law like this, considering it looks more like several laws bundled together.

Yet this string of laws doesn't end there! That same woman could have children with her new husband, and once she died, both her old and new children divided her dowry amongst themselves (173); if she had died before giving birth again, the dowry belonged to her sons from her prior marriage (174).

Law 175 departs from this and deals with slaves fathering children with women of higher status. The children could not be claimed by the slave's master, as they were free citizens. Slaves, however, still had some difficulties in this legal area; 176 stipulates that a slave could take a wife from a higher status and that the two could work together to earn more property, but after his death, his land was to be divided equally between the

wife and the master. In short, if your parent was a slave, you could only hope to inherit half of what he had prior to dying.

Wives and widows are one thing, but priestesses and remarried women are another, and the eight laws that follow cover their place in Babylonian law. Remarriage had to take into account the prior estate, the children, and the reselling of property (or rather, a ban thereof). A widow that still had children who were minors couldn't remarry until a judge looked over her specific case, according to law 177. The judge was obliged to look into the state of her first house. If all was in order, this house fell under the management of the second husband and the widow herself. They had to legally officiate this decision with a document. Within this house, she had to take care of her children and maintain it without selling anything. Should someone buy the goods from her house, they lost the money immediately, and the utensils went back to the widow's house.

Then come the laws regarding the priestesses. Law 178 stipulates that a priestess or a devotee could gain a portion of her father's inheritance from her brothers that inherited it, and if they failed to do so, she was to have the land herself. Naturally, she was not to sell the land. The next law in line directly links to this one and states that if the father of the priestess specifically claimed that she can do whatever she wanted with her property, then the brothers got nothing.

180 makes it clear that the daughter gained the amount of produce or grain after the father's death if he gave her this as a present, while the rest of the estate went under the ownership of her brothers. However, according to 181, a temple maid or virgin without such a present got only a third of her potential inheritance. A slight difference appears with the priestesses of Marduk, the titular deity of Babylon; these priestesses got a third of the house which she could use, but not sell. After her death, this part of the estate went to whomsoever she wanted it to go to (182).

Concubines would not be treated as well as wives in terms of property; a father could give a concubine a dowry upon marriage, but she received nothing from his estate after he died (183). In case she got nothing during her father's lifetime, the brother who inherited the wealth provided the dowry and attempted to secure a husband for the concubine (184).

Ten laws close this subsection, and they deal with a very peculiar topic for the ancient world, that of child adoption. One look at all ten of these laws

paints a picture of both the benefits and flaws of being adopted. First, there's law 185, which stipulates that once a man adopted a son and raised him as his own, the biological father could not claim him as his own son (should he change his mind about the boy, of course). Then there's law 186 that states a punishment for the adopted son if he hurt his foster parents. By this law, he was to return to his biological father, presumably losing all rights he might have had as the son of a new family. Sons of prostitutes or temple devotees were also unable to return to their biological parents, according to 187. The same goes for artisan parents and their adopted children, as the following law stipulates. However, there's an addition to this law in the form of law 189, wherein an adopted son might not have learned the craft and had to be returned to his original parents. The son could also return, as law 190 states, if the foster father didn't rear him equally with his other children. Law 191 then deals with inheritance. An adopted child could be disinherited in favor of the biological children of the adoptive father. However, the adopted son couldn't just be abandoned by his father; the father had to provide him with a third of the inheritance his biological children would get. This did not include the field, the garden, or the house. The last three laws, namely 192, 193, and 194, again show us how cruel Babylonians could be with punishments. Sons of temple maidens or prostitutes were forbidden from rejecting their adoptive parents, and if they did, their tongues were cut off (192). Eyes were plucked out of any prostitute's or temple maid's son that claimed the house of his biological father while rejecting his foster parents (193), whereas a nurse that had to take care of a newborn child but instead nursed a different one while the original child died would lose her breasts for lying to the parents (194).

Adopted children were not to be returned unless something extreme, like neglect of a child or assaulting the original parents, were to happen. The social class of the adopter also dictated where the adopted child remained. Artisans could keep their new "apprentices" if they taught them what to do, and children of prostitutes or temple personnel no longer belonged to the original parents. Adopted children also had the ability to be compensated should the father have the idea of disavowing them, but any unseemly behavior on their side was very brutally punished (for example, cutting off the tongue or pulling out an eye).

The entire section dealing with assault basically contains only one subsection, or twenty laws. Most of them are essentially the same principle

told in a different way, but as an example of what this principle was, only two laws are really needed for an explanation:

*196. If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.*

*200. If a man knock out the teeth of his equal, his teeth shall be knocked out.*

One of the laws most often compared to the Hammurabi Code is biblical law. The reason for this lies in these two particular laws, which can best be summed up with the famous quote "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." A consensus between historians is that most nations in the region, Jews included, had a set of common laws which they codified (separately from one another) and presided over in courts. Most of the principles of these ancient nations match each other, so much so that it's nearly impossible to talk about Hammurabi without mentioning the Hebrew Bible.

However, assault wasn't judged, tried, and punished the same due to different social strata. Slaves were often punished more severely (205), whereas free men paid differently from men who were just freed from slavery (203, 204), and hitting someone of a higher status would bring about a penalty of public whipping (202). Striking a man without intent would result in paying their medical bills (206) or compensation if the struck man died (207). Women are covered in the final six laws of this section. Any man that struck a free woman and caused her to lose a child she was carrying had to pay ten shekels for compensation (209). In more drastic cases, if that same woman died alongside the unborn child, the daughter of the man who hit her was also to be killed (210). However, women of the lower class would only get five shekels for the loss of their unborn child from the man who hit them (211), and half a mina went to her family if she died from that blow (212). Maidservants were on an even lower scale, as they would get no more than two shekels for that same exact crime (213), and their families only received a single third of a mina in case of the woman's death (214).

Yet again, we see that women were protected by the law, but it was important to be born in the right class, much like with the men charged with assault. Women of all social layers are covered here, and other than 210, all of them specify monetary compensation rather than capital punishment.

The section regarding the fees for different professions is, admittedly, a bit more tedious than the earlier ones, but it gives us a decent insight into how

professionals were treated in Hammurabi's Babylon. Eleven laws cover how much doctors and vets were paid, depending on the class of the customer (215, 216, 217, 221, 222, 223, 224) or how they were penalized if they made a mistake (218, 219, 220, 225). What follows are two laws regarding barbers who accidentally removed slave marks. Law 226 states that a barber that cut off the slave sign of a person that wasn't sold yet would lose both of his hands. On the other hand, a barber could be tricked into doing this. The person who tricked the barber into this action was sentenced to death and post-death burning in their own house. The barber only had to swear that he didn't do it consciously and he was free of any guilt (227).

The oath-swearing in 227 is more of an afterthought than a condition, considering it follows the pretty well-thought up penalty for the man who tricked the barber into messing with the slave's sign.

The remaining 13 laws here deal with boatmen and builders, and follow roughly the same formula as the laws before them. Of these, only three deal with how much the craftsman was to be paid (228, 234, 239), with literally all the other laws in this subsection dealing with punishments. The most brutal are the ones dealing with accidentally killing the owner of the house or his family members (229, 230). All other laws in this group stipulate compensation in terms of money or goods.

Nearing the end of the stele, three more sections make up the remaining 41 laws. Agriculture comes first, and the first ten laws of the subsection talk about cattle, specifically oxen. Any ox impressed for forced labor was worth a third of a mina (241), whereas a year of using or "renting" plow-oxen could cost the tiller up to four gur of grain (242). Renting herding cattle would cost a Babylonian three gur of grain (243), a gur less than those of an ox for plowing. Then there was the issue of losing animals. Lions could kill oxen or asses in the field, and their loss was on the owner of the animals, not the person renting them (244). Each ox that the tiller would harm or kill had to be replaced and be compensated for to the owner (245), and the same applied for broken legs or cut neck ligaments of bulls (246) and pulled-out eyes, which only earned half of the bull's value (247). The fractions continue in law 248, where a broken horn, a snipped tail, or an injured muzzle could only get the owner of the harmed bull a fourth of its value in compensations. Yet there were times when the gods above would "smite" the bull, at which point the tiller merely had to swear an oath

that this had happened, and he would be guilt-free (249). He would also be innocent if a random stranger were to push the ox in a crowded street and injure it (250). What's more, the owner would have to compensate others if his ox was proven to be one that was prone to injuring others (251); in that case, he had to clip his horns or fasten it, but if a man was murdered by this ox due to the owner's neglect of the animal's violence, the owner had to pay half a mina of money to his family. This money was reduced to a third of a mina if the bull killed a slave (252).

It's important to state that none of these laws contains capital punishment. In other words, harming an ox or being harmed by one was never dealt with death, but rather exclusively with repaying the owner or the victim. Naturally, it goes without saying that the status of the owner of the victim will influence the gravity of the penalty.

The next four laws touch upon cattle but specifically deal with embezzling goods. Stealing the grain from the original owner while working on his field would result in the hired thief losing his fingers (253), whereas not tending to the field (254) and subletting the yoke to someone else and keeping the grain (255) only demanded material compensation. Law 256 is interesting considering how "creative" its punishment is: the embezzler was to plow the field by force ("be left on it with the cattle," as the law states) if he was unable to repay the amount the previous law states he must provide.

The eleven laws that close this subsection up talk about the hiring of individuals and the laws pertaining to them. Of these, one is sadly incomplete (law 262), but it clearly refers to cattle and is more than likely linked to the law that follows it. The laws cover prices for the services of field laborers, herdsmen, and ox-drivers (at the time a separate job title from, say, someone herding sheep) paid in grain (257, 258, 261), as well as compensation in case something was stolen or ruined during their services (259, 260, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267). Of these, only 266 deals with the potential innocence of a herdsman if something happened to the herd; once more, we see the oath sworn before the gods used as a "get out of jail free card," though the circumstances for when it could be used were very specific, e.g., if a god or a lion kills an animal.

The last two sections all consist of one subsection each. Laws 268-277 all more or less serve as a continuation of the previous subsection, as they deal with hiring rates for beasts of burden, workers, and vehicles. Of these, the first three are exclusive to animals. 268 states that twenty ka of grain was

the price for an ox used to thresh. The next law cites the same price for threshing, but this time the animal is an ass. Young animals of any kind were priced at ten ka (270).

What follows are prices of hiring wagons, with or without a driver and an ox. According to 271, an ox, a cart, and a driver would cost 180 ka of grain for a single day. However, 272 lets us know that just the cart was worth forty ka of grain, also per day.

Human workers weren't left out of this either. Law 273 states that a laborer hired to work from April to August (naturally, the law is represented in Babylonian months; this is a rough estimate of the time converted into the units we use today) was to be paid six gerahs of money for a day's work. From August to the end of the Babylonian year, the price would go down to five gerahs. Law 274 is a bit fragmented, but it deals with hiring artisans (potters, tailors, ropemakers, masons, etc.). Sadly, not all prices are available, but they fluctuate around five gerahs per day, some going up or down a gerah or two.

The hiring of ships and boats was also included in the code. Ferryboats would cost three gerahs of money per day to rent (275) and freight boats two and a half gerahs (276). Were Babylonians to rent a ship and pay sixty gur for it (277), one-sixth of that money would be paid up front as the rent money for the same day the boat was rented.

A gerah, at least according to the Bible, roughly amounted to 0.60 grams, or 0.02 ounces, whereas a gur amounted to 303 liters, or 80 US gallons. However, different sources cite different amounts for these ancient units of measurement, but these numbers are the most accurate close estimates.

Five laws round up the code portion of Hammurabi's Code, and they deal with slaves. Law 278 deals with slaves as "defective goods"—a slave that caught a specific disease was to be returned for a full refund, regardless of the slave's gender. Sometimes a third party would claim slaves that someone had already purchased, and law 279 states that the original owner of the slaves has to deal with this claim. Laws 280 and 281 are the last pair of laws in this Code to be closely conjoined, and they deal with slaves taken from a different city. If their previous owner recognizes them and they're all from the same city, they go to him without the new owner getting his money back; if they are from a different city, the new owner was to swear their price before the gods, get said money, and then relinquish the slaves to

the service of their old master. The final law, 282, deals with punishment of a male slave who declares that his owner isn't his master. The appropriate punishment of an ear being cut off is implemented here, as slaves, while in service of their masters, had to know their place. Of course, this law stipulates that the master had to prove that he owned the slave, but sadly we don't know what happens if he was proven wrong since this is where the law section ends.

*A cylinder seal worshiping the sun-god Shamash*[xlii].

# The Epilogue

As can be expected, the epilogue contains a lot of self-aggrandizing by Hammurabi. Once more, he restates how he subjugated the north and the south, how he brought peace to the land of Sumer and Akkad, and how he maintained balance and harmony within the borders of his empire. But it's what comes next that really gives historians a clue as to the purpose of the stele with these laws:

*The king who ruleth among the kings of the cities am I. My words are well considered; there is no wisdom like unto mine. By the command of Shamash, the great judge of heaven and earth, let righteousness go forth in the land: by the order of Marduk, my lord, let no destruction befall my monument. In E-Sagil, which I love, let my name be ever repeated; let the oppressed, who has a case at law, come and stand before this my image as king of righteousness; let him read the inscription, and understand my precious words: the inscription will explain his case to him; he will find out what is just, and his heart will be glad, so that he will say:*

*"Hammurabi is a ruler, who is as a father to his subjects, who holds the words of Marduk in reverence, who has achieved conquest for Marduk over the north and south, who rejoices the heart of Marduk, his lord, who has bestowed benefits for ever and ever on his subjects, and has established order in the land."*

*When he reads the record, let him pray with full heart to Marduk, my lord, and Zarpanit, my lady; and then shall the protecting deities and the gods, who frequent E-Sagil, graciously grant the desires daily presented before Marduk, my lord, and Zarpanit, my lady.*

This is Hammurabi directly talking to his subjects, to the people who will benefit (or be affected) by most by the laws listed here. Hammurabi was a king who cared for his subjects, or rather this is the impression he wanted to leave, and as such providing them with the means of achieving justice was not only expected but almost obligatory. Yet, it's not only the people Hammurabi commissioned this Code for, as the epilogue continues:

*In future time, through all coming generations, let the king, who may be in the land, observe the words of righteousness which I have written on my monument; let him not alter the law of the land which I have given, the edicts which I have enacted; my monument let him not mar. If such a ruler have wisdom, and be able to keep his land in order, he shall observe the*

*words which I have written in this inscription; the rule, statute, and law of the land which I have given; the decisions which I have made will this inscription show him; let him rule his subjects accordingly, speak justice to them, give right decisions, root out the miscreants and criminals from this land, and grant prosperity to his subjects.*

Much like later rulers and diplomats (Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, Niccolò Machiavelli), Hammurabi composed this work for the future ruler of his land, stressing how important it was to rule justly and fairly. He specifically noted, later in the epilogue, that any king who followed this Code to the letter should receive the blessings of the gods, and that any ruler who tried to change, erase, or destroy the code (which indeed happened later) should be cursed by those selfsame gods. The majority of the epilogue goes, in quite substantial detail, over all the different curses each god or goddess shall bring about to anyone sacrilegious enough to defile this monument.

# Notes on the Code; Common Misconceptions

Since its appearance, Hammurabi's Code was the subject of fierce debate even when it came to some basic questions, such as its intended purpose and makeup. With almost a century and a half of archeological and historical research, there are only a few details which the experts can ascertain about this magnificent monument.

The first and possibly most important question that needed to be answered was the purpose of the Code. Contrary to popular belief, and even contrary to the very name of this stele, Hammurabi's Code is not really a code. It wasn't used in judicial disputes, and references to the laws it covers are very few and far between, and even those are more conjecture than anything. In other words, judges did not use this stele as a reference point when they presided over legal cases. People involved in research regarding this Babylonian ruler have been wondering for years what reason this "code" was really created for if not for codifying the law of Hammurabi's new land. The best we can make out is what the ruler himself stated in the epilogue. This law was one of many monuments that glorified Hammurabi during his time, and more than that, it was meant to show everyone, noble and slave alike, how benevolent yet just Hammurabi was. Much like other steles in Mesopotamia during this period in history, it was created to boost the ruler in the eyes of the masses, but in a way that made them feel just as important to the kingdom as he was. Another possible purpose is that the Code is merely a collection of laws based on previous cases that have already been presided over. Convenience, if anything, could have driven the ruler to inscribe them on black diorite, and the message to future rulers regarding maintenance and usage of this Code further strengthens this argument, though not by much. Scientific consensus behind these claims is still not entirely clear, and until more direct evidence comes out, we can only speculate.

Another important detail to note about this Code is that it's by no means exhaustive. At best, it only contains civil laws. There are no references to military law or anything resembling "foreign policy," and there's no doubt that both of these elements had legal regulations attached to them. We don't know what laws there were for conscription, years of service, dealing with POWs, or how treaties were enacted (though some laws tangentially touch on some of these topics), nor do we know how a foreigner was treated if he

wanted to live in Babylon, not as a slave or prisoner, but as a free agent willing to buy land or set up shop in the city. We also don't get any laws regarding the health sector (other than a few pertaining to surgeons and veterinarians) or schooling, nor are there any laws dealing with potential emergency events, e.g., wars, natural disasters, famine, an epidemic of a disease. While the Code is pretty expansive in and of itself, it simply doesn't contain many of the elements a codified set of laws should undoubtedly have.

# Chapter 7 – Hammurabi's Legacy

There's little doubt that Hammurabi was influential throughout Mesopotamia. If we focus merely on the positive aspects of his domain, we find a plethora of ways in which this Babylonian king managed to change the entire political, religious, and cultural landscape of the entire region between the two rivers.

One thing that Hammurabi was especially proud of was the massive achievements regarding justice. Several poems and hymns committed to steles excavated at Ur and Sippar show how proud he was of his ability to rid his lands of wrongdoers and instill justice and proper law in his lands. He fancied himself a warrior, a peacemaker, and a champion of justice, and with the Code of Law standing tall some century and a half after his death, and now adorning the ever-busy hallways of the Louvre, there's a good argument to be made that he was right.

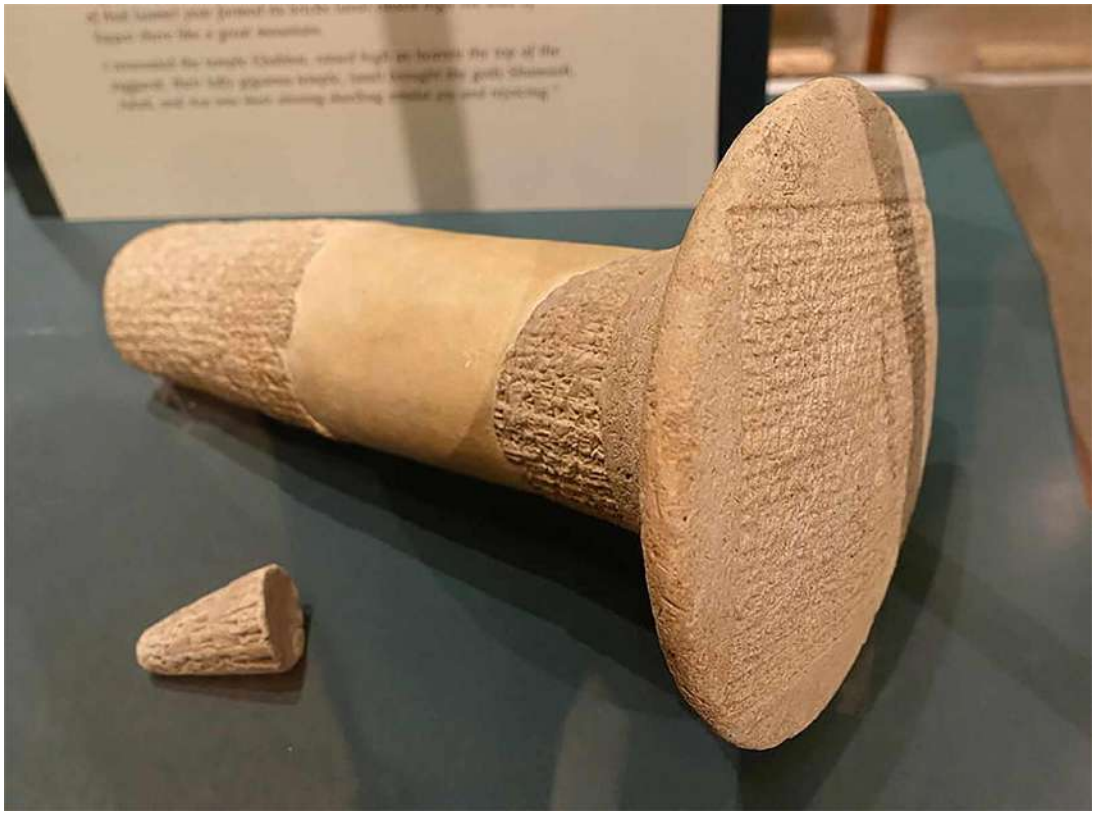
Hammurabi, of course, didn't really need to brag about his achievements, as others did that for him. In fact, unlike any ruler of his dynasty, he was deified years before he would leave the throne and pass away. The practice of declaring a ruler a god wasn't exactly uncommon in the Ancient Near East, but this was the first time a Babylonian was honored with this act, and it didn't stop there. Hammurabi even lived to see children being named in honor of him, such as Hammurabi-ili, which translates to "Hammurabi is my god."

Oddly enough, he wasn't the first person to be named Hammurabi, as even during his reign there was a ruler of a different city with the same name, as mentioned earlier in this book. The spike in popularity of that name had to come from his long and eventful reign though, and it's no wonder that two more rulers bore that name, both of them members of a different dynasty altogether. Again, this was not an isolated practice—Sargon was equally popular to the point of a much later ruler taking his name, as were other noteworthy kings of any city-state in the region.

Hammurabi was such a notable monarch that even people who lived an entire millennium after him remembered his name. Later poems and stories would evoke his name much in the same way they would with a deity such as Ishtar or Shamash. If we were to use modern terms, we could say that Hammurabi had entered "the mainstream" of Mesopotamia's wider culture.

His Code of Laws was a monument to this, and it's no wonder that Shutruk-Nahhunte, an Elamite king, raided Babylon in 1158 BCE and decided to take multiple valuable relics of the past, which included at least three stelae containing the Code. They found their home in Susa, not to be discovered until centuries later by a few curious European researchers. The Code even made its way to Assurbanipal's massive Assyrian library, where it was listed and kept.

The Code itself can be said to have influenced multiple other legal systems of antiquity. Hebrew law, famously, contains references to a few laws listed here, specifically those relating to the "an eye for an eye" principle. Its discovery was so important to worldwide legal heritage that the US capitol's House Chamber received a portrait of Hammurabi in 1949 as one of 23 people who influenced the creation of the American legal system. It's fascinating to think that, while a great fraction of his life was dedicated to conquest and war, Hammurabi is still remembered as an agent of peace and justice. Unlike Sargon, who is remembered for his conquests, or Utu-hengal who liberated the Sumerians from outside influence, or even Gilgamesh whose legendary battles inspired some of the most wonderful works of early fiction, Hammurabi will always be the lawgiver, the peacekeeper, the ruler who actively worked on bringing justice to his people.



*Samsu-iluna cone, 1749-1712 BCE, currently in Chicago, IL*[xliii]

# Conclusion

Hammurabi was undoubtedly a ruler of vast historical significance. With a reign lasting over four decades, he managed to grow from a local prince who cared more about rebuilding temples and repairing canals to a unifier of numerous kingdoms and a subjugator of former "great powers" of the ancient Middle East, from someone who was subservient to whoever was in charge at the time to a dominant despot whom everyone feared and respected. Like few kings and emperors before him, he had united the region under his foot, but unlike his predecessors, he had changed how countries functioned in Mesopotamia forever. With him, the age of the city-state died, and the first age of empires was born. It's no wonder then that his name rang loud and true centuries, even millennia, after his death.

But he was more than just a powerful conqueror. His relations with conquered cities, while not always great, spoke volumes of how he treated his subjects. At least on the surface level, Hammurabi tried his best to pacify the region, rebuilding local temples and taking the people's livelihoods into account. His now famous Code, more than anything else, shows that justice among his subjects was his principal concern, and for the briefest of times, Mesopotamia enjoyed a unified legal treatment, one where they could rely on their ruler to maintain justly and one where he himself frequently participated in as the supreme judge regardless of how minor the case was.

Finally, his Code more or less changed how we view history, influencing future generations as much as it did past ones. Scientists and scholars are now questioning the age of biblical law, and they sought parallels between this code and many that followed, and, as the research grew, even the laws that preceded it. Mesopotamian history itself is so indebted to Hammurabi that the principal ways of measuring time include the years of his reign as a reference. The adjective "far-reaching" doesn't do this king justice, as his influence goes beyond that.

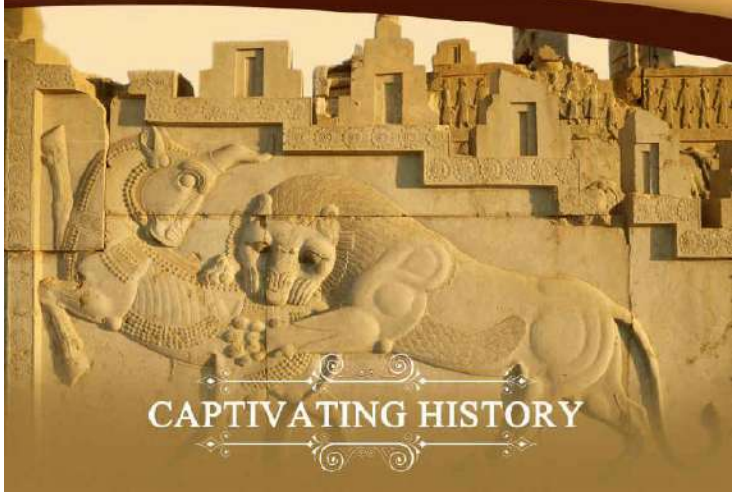
Ultimately, Hammurabi was human, and though his humanity is visible only in bits and pieces through epistolary communication of his peers, it nevertheless shows us that even the most legendary of warriors, rulers, and leaders had some frailty to them. Examining the Code itself, as well as Hammurabi's actions, lets us know that he wasn't as perfect as he portrayed

himself to be (like all rulers of his time did), but these imperfections only make his contribution to world history more powerful. Hammurabi will only continue to fascinate future generations of researchers, and with each year new sources will surface, providing us with more precious information about this spectacular Babylonian king.

# Part 7: The Persian Empire
# A Captivating Guide to the History of Persia, Starting from the Ancient Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian Empires to the Safavid, Afsharid, and Qajar Dynasties

# THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF PERSIA, STARTING FROM THE ANCIENT ACHAEMENID, PARTHIAN, AND SASSANIAN EMPIRES TO THE SAFAVID, AFSHARID, AND QAJAR DYNASTIES



CAPTIVATING HISTORY

# Introduction

Students of ancient history are well aware of the Persians. A still-present cultural and linguistic group, the Persians are the founders of today's modern-day nation of Iran. They trace their roots back to the Aryans of Northern Europe, but over the course of time, they managed to assert a distinct identity that led to the formation of some of the world's most powerful empires.

One of the most shocking things about the Persians is how quickly they went from an obscure, powerless, and nomadic tribe to an immense empire that spanned across western Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe. The rise of Cyrus the Great, considered the father of Persia, in the 7th century BCE filled the power vacuum caused by the fall of the Assyrians, and it led to the formation of one of the most powerful empires of the ancient world.

This first empire, known as the Achaemenid Empire, controlled one of the biggest empires by land area ever recorded. Persian troops made it as far west as Libya and Greece, and Persian governments controlled the territories in the modern-day nations of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as well as India. Their constant wars with the Greeks played a pivotal role in the development of this culture by forcing the Greek city-states to unite, leading to a Greek Golden Age, which has had a tremendous influence on the world we live in today; had the Greeks been unable to stop the Persian advance, there's no telling how different the world would be.

However, like all empires of the ancient world, the Achaemenids would not last forever. Constant war depleted their resources, and the rise of the Greeks and Macedons under Alexander the Great eventually pushed the great Persian Empire into the background of history. But the Persians were not to disappear forever. Successive dynasties starting in the 3rd century BCE and continuing until the 7th century CE helped reestablish Persia as a dominant force in the region, and they played a major role in the creation and propagation of a Persian cultural and ethnic identity that would last throughout the nearly 900 years of Islamic rule and continue up until the present day.

The Persians have made significant contributions to world culture, ranging from their ability to raise and train one of the ancient world's most formidable fighting forces, the Persian Immortals, to their new and effective

ways of organizing and administering government. And Persian art heavily influenced their Muslim invaders, helping to usher in the Islamic Golden Age that helped spread Islam throughout the Middle East and Africa.

Some aspects of Persian culture would disappear through time, but many would remain, even if only in small pockets. Zoroastrianism, for example, one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, played an important role in Persian culture and identity until the Islamic invasion, but it is still around today and practiced by thousands of people across Iran and India. So, while the glory of the Persian Empire is very much a thing of the past, its influence on the world is not. As such, understanding how the Persians rose to power, and how they exerted their influence on the many different cultural groups in western Asia, helps us better understand both the history of the Middle East as well as the entire world.

# Chapter 1 – Who Are the Persians? The History of Human Population in Iran

Nowadays, Persia is a household name. People eat Persian food, enjoy Persian goods, and millions of people speak the Persian language. And it has become nearly synonymous with the modern country of Iran. But this was not always the case. In fact, when examining history using a broad perspective, the Iranians are relatively new to the Middle Eastern scene. But a combination of chance, cultural development, and military might would quickly change this and turn Persia and the Persian people into one of the world's most famous civilizations. However, before looking at how the Persian Empire rose to power, it's important to understand the origins of the Persian people and also the land they would eventually call home.

### *The Arrival of the Iranians and the Persians*

The civilization eventually understood as Persia gets its name from the region of Persis, which is located in northwestern Iran in the modern region of Fars. It is here where the Iranian tribe, the Pasargadae, sometimes referred to as the Parsua, decided to settle in the 7th century BCE after a long and slow migration from the north and west. The city they built, also named Pasargadae, would become the cultural and political center of the early Persian Empire. However, while the modern conception of Persian civilization did not officially begin until the last millennium BCE, the story of the Persian people starts much earlier in the timeline of human history.

Evidence of human populations in Iran dates all the way back to the Late Glacial Age as well as the Late Stone Age. However, archaeological evidence suggests humans did not start abandoning their nomadic lifestyle in favor of a sedentary one based on agriculture until the 5th or perhaps even 6th century BCE.

And as people began to give up their nomadic ways in favor of sedentary, agricultural civilizations, mass migrations took place, bringing peoples from many different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds toward the Middle East. It is believed the Persians are the result of a mixing of Eastern and Western ethnicities, largely those originating from the Central Asian plateau, and also the Aryans and other ethnic groups who trace their beginnings back to Russia and many of today's Slavic states.

As was common for ancient civilizations, upon the settlement of Persis, the tribes named a leader, or king. However, this "king" would have had power only over the tribe that had granted him the right to rule, and he would have had virtually no influence over surrounding territories. This would change rather rapidly when placed within the context of ancient history (Persia would begin flexing its imperial muscles less than 200 years after the founding of Pasargadae), but in the beginning, the Persians would have been vassals to other more powerful groups in the region, specifically the Medes.

The Medes were an ethnic group and eventual kingdom (and perhaps empire, depending on how one defines the term) who were contemporaries of the Late Assyrian Empire (c. 1000 BCE-600 BCE). They are believed to have arrived onto the scene as early as the 2nd or possibly even the 3rd century BCE, and they would eventually control large parts of Northwestern Iran, Southeastern Turkey, and Western Iraq. Unfortunately, no Medes site has ever been excavated, and most of what is known about the civilization has been learned by studying the records of surrounding civilizations. So, while they were certainly influential in the region, the extent of their political control in the region is unknown, and it's believed they, generally speaking, held a loose grip on power that was largely dependent on the wills and whims of their more powerful neighbors, specifically the Elamites and the Assyrians.

However, the role of the Medes in shaping Persian history cannot be understated. While the Persians would have been subjects to this neighboring kingdom, similarities in language and religion helped bring these two peoples closer together. Specifically, the Medes and the Persians both spoke an Iranian language and are part of the Iranian ethnic group. Neither would have been able to fully understand the other, but the similarity in the structure of these two languages would have made it easier for the two groups to communicate and form networks of trade and political power.

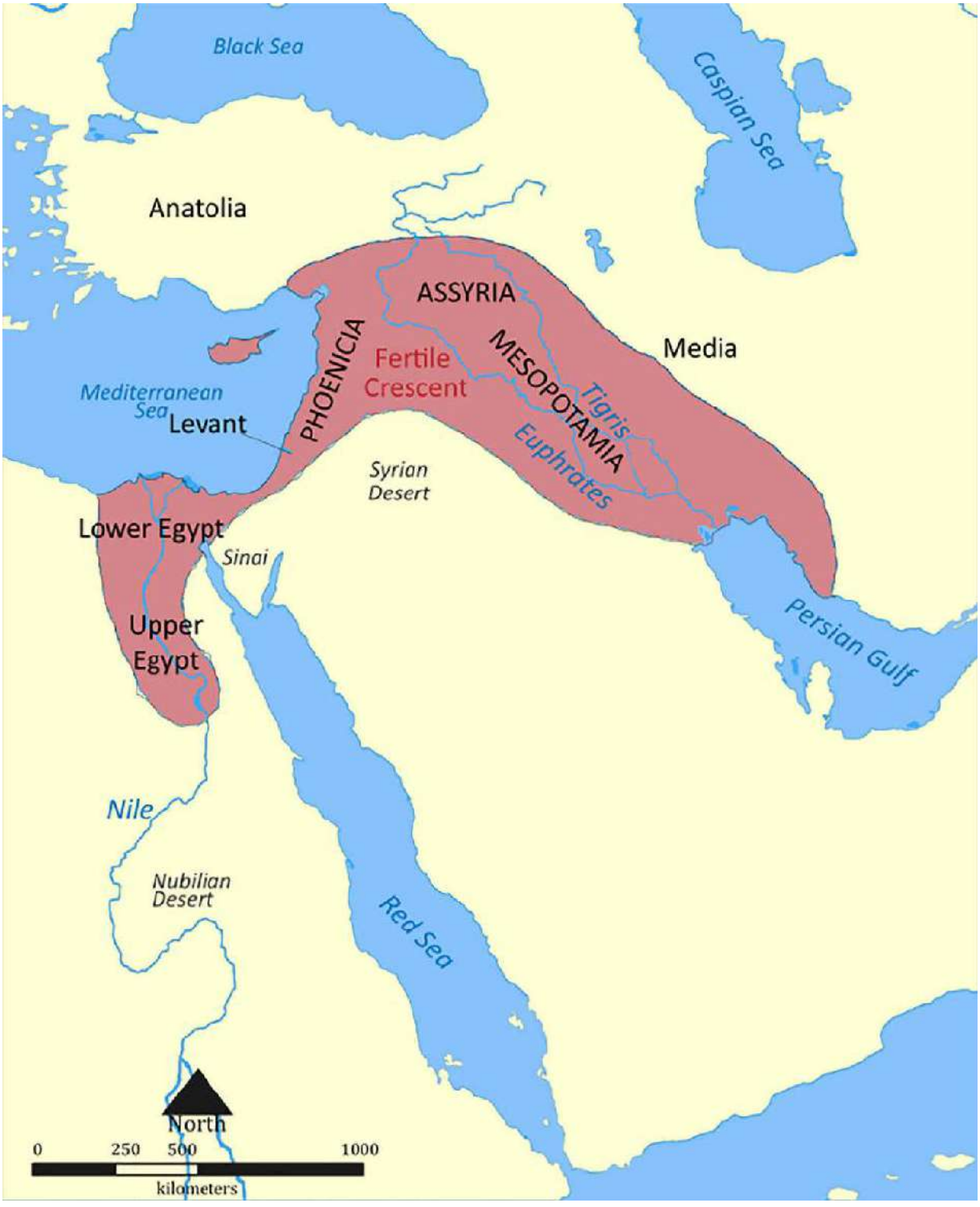
Distinct from the Semitic languages spoken throughout much of Mesopotamia and Western Asia at the time, the Iranians are an ethnolinguistic group comprised of many different other ethnic groups, such as the Bactrians, Cimmerians, Medes, Parthians, Persians, and Scythians, among others, with the unifying characteristic of this ethnolinguistic group being the Iranian language. Iranian is a part of the broader Indo-Iranian language group, which is a branch of the much wider Indo-European classification that includes some 445 living languages, including Spanish,

Hindi, English, Portuguese, Punjab, German, French, Italian, and Persian, among others.

Furthermore, at the time of Persian arrival into Iran, they were practicing a religion that would have been familiar to the Medes, for both shared their roots in the Antidemonic Law traditions known to have been a prominent part of Aryan culture (the peoples originating from Russia and other parts of northeastern Europe).

This religion had no "gods." Instead, life on Earth was understood to be controlled by a series of unnamed demons that were responsible for all the terrible things that can define existence. And they were essentially a fire cult, worshiping sacred fire as their primary deity. However, as the Persians settled and became more influential in the region, they would begin to adapt some of the religious practices of the Medes and other Iranian cultures in the region, eventually giving birth to Zoroastrianism, the largest religion to come out of Iran with the exception of Islam.

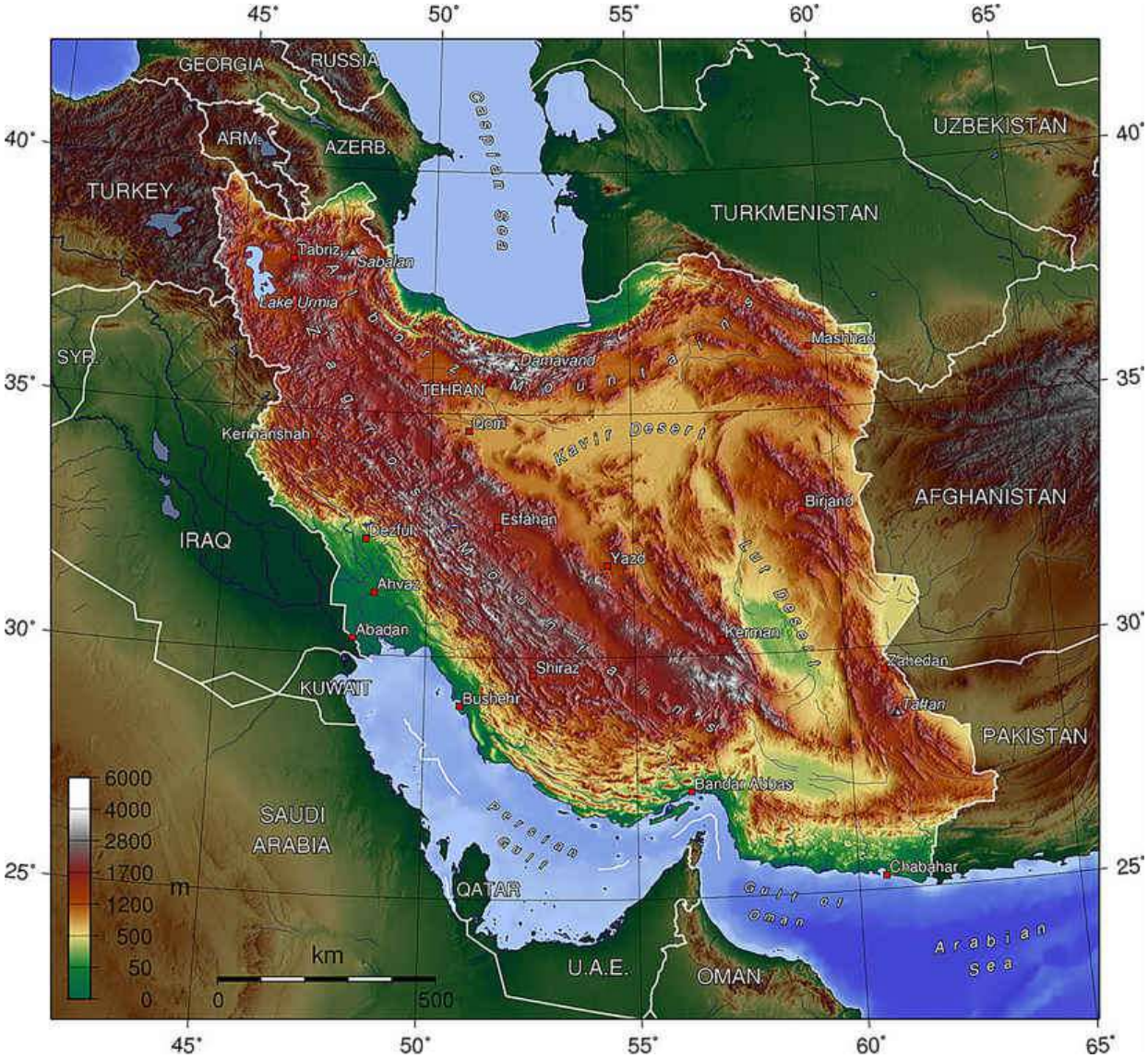
However, the Persians, with their Iranian language and Iranian/Aryan religious customs, would have been dramatically different from the other cultures already living there. When they arrived in the Fertile Crescent (the area including Mesopotamia—the large fertile valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in modern-day Iraq, as well as the surrounding territories in modern-day Israel and the Persian Gulf. See Figure 1 below.), they would have been considered "northerners." And because of their distinct language, they would have also been considered "foreigners"; at the time, most of the people in the region spoke a Semitic language, such as Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian, etc. This classification would play an important role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of Iran and the surrounding territory.




***The Geography and Geopolitics of the Middle East*: *The Birth of the Persian Empire***

Apart from the cultural, religious, and linguistic differences that existed in the ancient Middle East, the geography of the region also played a critical

role in shaping the course of the region's history. The best word to describe the Iranian plateau and the surrounding territories is harsh. Mountains surround nearly the entire region. In the north, bordering the Caspian Sea, are the Alborz Mountains, and the western borders of modern Iraq, which run alongside the borders with Iraq and Turkey, are protected by the Zagros Mountains. Deserts dominate the topography in both central and southern Iran, with the plateau slowly rising toward the east to eventually form part of the great Himalayas. Figure 2 shows the topography of Iran and the surrounding region. Persis in ancient times would have been the region in southern Iran surrounding the modern-day city of Shiraz.




Because of this climate, locations for human settlement were scarce. Most fertile land existed in between mountaintops, and rainfall in the region was,

and still is, minimal. The majority of the territory must rely on snow melts in the spring for their water supply, and securing this precious resource was, and still is, frequently at the top of the priority list for any leader in the region. Yet despite these difficulties, people were able to find ways to install and grow civilizations. But traditional agriculture was not common, with people making use of animal husbandry as their primary source of food and income.

However, because of their cultural and linguistic differences, and also because of the geopolitical situation at the time of their arrival in Iran, Persian history is very much defined by how they interacted with their more powerful and more influential neighbors.

With the founding of Pasargadae in the 7th century BCE, Assyria, which had been the dominant power in the region for much of the last 300 years, was on the brink of collapse. But it was still the most powerful empire in Mesopotamia and abroad; their sphere of influence extended as far west as Egypt and as far east as the Zagros Mountains. Assyrian records indicate that the first Persian kings, who held loose hegemony over the region of Persis, were vassals to the Assyrian kings, sending tribute to them as a sign of their fealty.

However, by the end of the 7th century BCE, Assyria would fall and all but disappear from the annals of history. But when this happened, new powers, specifically Babylon, Elam, Chaldaea, Lydia, Egypt, and to a lesser extent, Greece, were all flexing their muscles in western Asia, meaning right from the beginning the Persians would need to fight to maintain control over the territory they were to call home. That the Persian Empire would go down in history as one of the most militarily advanced should come as no surprise to students of history.

Yet this transition would not occur overnight. After the fall of Assyria, the Persians would become vassals to the Medes, who were gaining influence in the region and who helped the Babylonians, Elamites, and Egyptians topple the Assyrian Empire. But Persia was growing in both size and influence. It had begun to establish its own monarchic tradition, with one royal family, the Achaemenid, assuming complete control over the Persian throne. This family slowly grew in power, and in c. 550 BCE, Cyrus II, also known as Cyrus the Great, rose to power and succeeded in overthrowing Median rule, effectively giving Persia political autonomy, and birthing the first Persian

Empire and dynasty, which would play an important role in shaping the region's history.

***Conclusion***

Overall, the Persians can be considered latecomers to the scene of Ancient Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Middle East. But this is not to discount their influence. Using the lens of historical hindsight, the Persians arrived at a particularly fortuitous time in history. The fall of the Assyrians meant political turmoil in the region. And although the Neo-Babylonian Empire would take control over much of Mesopotamia, Iran and the surrounding region was up for the taking. The succession of kings in the Achaemenid Dynasty would bring great glory to the Persian people, and they would help cement the Persians as one of the most formidable, powerful, and influential civilizations in all of human history.

# Chapter 2 – The Birth of the Achaemenid Empire: The Rise and Reign of Cyrus the Great

By the middle of the 6th century BCE, the political landscape in Mesopotamia and the surrounding area had changed considerably. Assyria was no more, and the alliance formed by two of its enemies—Babylon and Media—had thinned. Their relationship was tenuous, and after the spoils of the Assyrian Empire had been conquered, tensions began to rise once again.

At this time, different Persian tribes scattered throughout the region of Persis were beginning to unify and exert some form of national identity. This surge in nationalism came at the right time for the Persians, for political turmoil in the region meant the conditions for asserting their independence were rather favorable.

### *Establishing a Nation: The Unification of Persia*

In 559 BCE, the first real momentous event in Persian history would take place: the crowning of Cyrus II, who would later be known as Cyrus II the Great. This moniker was likely given in recognition of his tremendous accomplishment: uniting the Persian tribes and expanding the Persian Empire to be the largest in the region at the time.

Cyrus II's capital was Pasargadae, and it was occupied largely by members of the Pasargadae tribe, which was ruled by Cyrus II's family, the Achaemenid. But at this moment in history, he would have been a vassal to the Median kings. Yet he was not satisfied with being relegated to the role of a secondary king, so he began to plot a revolt that would help the Persian people claim some degree of political autonomy.

He started by gathering the support of other Persian tribes that had settled throughout the Iranian plateau, namely the Maraphii, the Maspii, the Panthialaei, Deusiaei, and the Germanii. But Cyrus II knew he would be unable to overthrow Median rule completely on his own, so after succeeding in unifying many of the different Persian tribes, he began seeking out an ally to support him in his revolution.

As mentioned earlier, the warmness that defined Babylonian-Median affairs during their joint attempt to remove the Assyrians from their position of dominance had cooled considerably, and although the two powers were not in open conflict, they were also not good friends. As a result, Babylon

would be Cyrus II's top choice as an ally, and considering Babylon was Persia's next closest neighbor not counting Media, this decision made logical sense.

At the time Cyrus II was plotting his revolt against his Median rulers, Babylonia was going through a transition. The Chaldaeans—an ethnic group that made up a large part of the Babylonian Empire—were always creating controversy regarding the Babylonian throne, for they were often not welcomed as leaders by other powers in the region; Assyria, Elam, and Media would frequently support revolts inside Babylon that came about as a result of a Chaldaean rising to the throne.

When Cyrus II was gathering support for his rebellion, Babylon did not have anyone with a clear claim to the throne. Eventually, an anti-Chaldaean leader, Nabu-naid, was made king, and he made an alliance with Cyrus II to help him retake lands lost to the Medians during the wars with Assyria just the century before, specifically the region surrounding the city of Harran, which was the last city to fall in the Assyrian Empire, removing them from power in the region.

Cyrus II began his war against the Medians in 555 BCE, and the Babylonians did their part by expelling Medians from contested territories near the Persian Gulf. This occupied Median forces from both fronts, which made it far easier for Cyrus II and his armies to move into Median territory and conquer its cities, including its capital, Ecbatana. Efforts by the Medians to retaliate were thwarted by mutiny—their troops likely recognizing their imminent doom—and this meant that by 550 BCE Cyrus II had succeeded in conquering Media. Persia was now officially an independent nation, but its power and influence would in part derive from the close connections it had with the former Median Empire. Cyrus II essentially assumed control over what the Medians had already built, and he and his successors would expand upon that to firmly place the Persians at the center of this powerful Iranian civilization.

This is understandably a glorious moment in Persian history, but it would also set in motion a period of considerable uncertainty that the Persians would need to deal with to be able to maintain their newfound autonomy. Specifically, the conquest of the Median tribes meant that Cyrus II now felt he had the right to rule over territories once claimed by Median kings, which were spread out across Mesopotamia, Assyria, Syria, Armenia, and Cappadocia (a region in modern-day Turkey).

However, the Babylonians also felt they had legitimate claims to these lands, which put Persia immediately into conflict with a culture that had been its ally just several years before. As a result, these beginning stages of Persian history are closely tied to what the Babylonians were doing and how these two powerful kingdoms negotiated the absence of Media, which had previously served as a buffer between Babylon and other more powerful nations to the east. But before Cyrus II would set to work on conquering the Babylonians and bringing southern Mesopotamia under his control, he would spend time in the north of the Fertile Crescent, which helped him extend Persian influence further westward.

### *Rising Power: The Conquest of Lydia*

The remarkable thing about Cyrus II is that he went from being king of a powerful yet small city in the Iranian plateau to the emperor of a vast civilization stretching from his homeland to all the way west to Egypt in less than a lifetime. And his successors would go even further by reaching and engaging in battle with the outlying Greek city-states. Because of this, in just one generation, Persia went from being a collection of scattered tribes identifying with the same origins and speaking the same language to the largest empire ever seen in the Fertile Crescent and Mediterranean. In fact, it would become the largest empire in the world at the time, except for China.

When Cyrus came to power, he would have been called the King of Ashan, the name of the village from which he came, the one that would have given him his title and the right to rule. Little mention was made of the term "King of Persia" until much later in history, and it may have come from the name used by cultures from afar to describe a territory populated by different Persian tribes. The first mention of the King of Persia comes from Babylonian records, who would have recognized the change in power coming from one of their closest and most powerful allies.

After Cyrus II managed to conquer Media, he began to set his sights further afield, specifically toward the kingdoms of Lydia and Babylon. But it took him nearly three years to rally his troops and set out on campaign. There would have been resistance to Cyrus II's conquest, meaning some former Median subjects would have resisted giving fealty to Cyrus II, which would have required military operation. But once Cyrus II felt he had the situation sufficiently under control, he would have reorganized and set out on campaign.

The Lydian kingdom is located west of Media in central Turkey. (Figure 3 shows a map of how 6th century Iran and Mesopotamia may have been politically organized before the Persian rise to power).

While not very powerful, the kingdom of Lydia was strategically located, particularly for its more powerful western neighbors, i.e., Greece and Egypt. Both saw Lydia as a useful buffer between themselves and the more powerful kingdoms that tended to come out of Mesopotamia. They likely would not have fully understood the extent of Persian power at this time, but after three centuries of Assyrian rulers, the leaders of Egyptian and Greek kingdoms knew to keep their distance. As a result, they were willing to offer support to the Lydians when they needed help defending themselves from eastern invaders.

Around 30 years before the rise of Cyrus II, Lydia and Media had signed a treaty to establish the boundary of Halys, which would divide Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) among the Lydians and the Medians (see figure 3 above to find the border between these two kingdoms.) However, when Cyrus conquered the Medians in 550 BCE, the leaders of Lydia feared Cyrus II would not honor the terms of this treaty.

As a result, the Lydian king at the time, Croesus, sent to the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Greeks for help. And in the meantime, he launched an attack

against Cyrus II, effectively negating the treaty between the two nations and going on the offensive as a way to protect his own people and territory.

Records indicate that Cyrus II's first response was to try and incite a rebellion inside Lydian territory by appealing to the Ionians (the term used to describe the Greeks living in Asia Minor), but this must have been unsuccessful, for in 547 BCE, Cyrus II rallied his troops and entered Lydian territory, advancing all the way to its capital, Sardis, which led to the death of Croesus and the elimination of the Lydian kingdom as an independent nation. With this victory, the Persian Empire now spanned across the entirety of Northern Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, as well as the Iranian plateau. It was rapidly becoming the region's hegemon.

What's interesting to note about the conquest of Lydia is that this would have brought together two very different cultures. When Cyrus II took control of Media, he was assuming power in a land full of people not exceptionally different from his own. They both spoke Iranian languages; they would have looked relatively similar, for both groups could trace their origins back to the Aryans of the north; and they practiced the same religion. However, when Cyrus conquered the Lydians, he brought people under his control who had been heavily influenced by Greek culture and Greek thinking. This would have made it a challenge for him to maintain control over the region. And it also helps show why Cyrus II would have been inclined to treat Greek customs or beliefs as something less than his own. The Persians and Greeks have a long history together defined by conflict and rivalry, and it's possible this came from the initial cultural shock Cyrus II would have experienced upon riding into Asia Minor and claiming the lands of Lydia as part of the Persian Empire.

***Solidifying Control: The Conquest of Babylon***

After managing to secure control of the Lydians, Cyrus II had managed to grow the size of the Persian Empire considerably. Its sphere of influence in 547 BCE would have included the Iranian plateau and its surrounding territories, including the lands previously controlled by the Medians, as well as the Lydian kingdom. At this point in the story, though, Neo-Babylonia and Egypt remain independent, but they would soon have to face advances from Cyrus II's powerful army.

Egypt would likely have felt more secure since an invasion into their territory would have required Cyrus II and his army to cross through Syria

and Phoenicia, territories still loyal to the Babylonian throne. Yet the Babylonian king would have recognized his peril.

However, he would have to wait nearly seven years for the fighting to begin. It's unclear what Cyrus II was doing during these years. It would have made sense to simply continue his advance southward from Lydia into Babylon, but something took his attention away. There is some speculation that he had to attend to matters in the furthest eastern parts of the newly formed empire, but these facts have not been confirmed.

Nevertheless, when Cyrus II did finally organize an attack into Babylon in 540 BCE, it seemed the time spent in between the two campaigns had given him the chance to properly prepare for the invasion. Cyrus II would march into Babylon and be able to call himself king within the year, meaning that by 539 BCE, the Neo-Babylonian Empire had fallen.

Part of the reason Cyrus II was able to be so successful in his invasion is because of internal strife that existed among the different rulers within Babylon. A long-time source of conflict within Babylonian affairs were the Chaldaeans. This ethnic group claimed to be the "true Babylonians," and they used these assertions to grant themselves power over the land. However, other groups did not see things this way, and there were constant struggles between Chaldaeans and other ethnic groups throughout Babylonian history. Cyrus II incited anti-Chaldaean sentiment upon his invasion and was able to win the support of many Babylonian citizens, making his invasion much easier.

But Cyrus II must have recognized that although he was now the king of Babylon, maintaining that title would require close control over this once very powerful group of people. As a result, he installed himself in the palace of Babylonian royalty, added the title King of Babylon to his, and also appointed his son, Cambyses, governor of Babylon, so as to give him tighter control over the region.

### *Conclusion: The Death of Cyrus II*

After his successful conquest of Babylon, the next logical target would have been Egypt to the west. Control of Babylon gave Cyrus II a claim to both Syrian and Phoenician lands, and it seemed as though he would face little resistance in solidifying control in these regions. But this westward expansion would not occur while Cyrus II would be alive. His last ten years as king were spent building up his new empire and consolidating power,

and when he died in 529 BCE, his son Cambyses took over as the new king of Persia, and he would be the one to enter Egypt.

As a conqueror, it's important to put Cyrus II's achievements in perspective. In the course of just 30 years, Cyrus II took loosely connected Persian tribes and unified them in an effort to assert autonomy over their Median rulers. But once he did this, he immediately embarked on a campaign of expansion that rivals any other in history. By the time of his death, the Median, Lydian, and Babylonian Empires, some of the most powerful in the ancient world, had been wiped off the face of the earth for good, and they were now closely controlled by Cyrus and his newfound Persian Empire. This remarkable expansion makes it easy to understand why Persian historians look back and call their first true leader Cyrus the Great.

# Chapter 3 – The Glory of the Achaemenid Empire: Cambyses & Darius

Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great, unified Persia and then set out on military conquests that would make it western Asia's largest empire at the time. However, as any student of ancient history knows, successful conquest does not mean a successful empire. Once lands and kingdoms have been subjugated, there is a period of consolidation in which kings establish themselves as the true ruler of a territory.

However, this oftentimes is not the job of the king who does the conquering. Instead, it's typically his successors who manage to fortify the gains made by the conqueror, and their success in doing this determines whether these conquests result in the formation of an empire capable of lasting more than a generation or if they will disappear into the annals of history as a mere detour in some other civilization's path to power.

The two kings who came after Cyrus II, his son, Cambyses II, and Darius I, a potential pretender who managed to win the Persian crown despite facing frequent insurrections, were able to follow up on the first Persian emperor's successes. Cambyses II managed to expand the empire even further, and then Darius I, who ruled for much longer, fortified these gains and set up an imperial administration that would put Persia in a position for sustained hegemony. The Achaemenid Dynasty started as nothing more than a few kings who ruled over one Persian tribe, but by the end of Darius I's rule, it would be one of the most powerful dynasties in the history of both Persia and the entire ancient world.

### *The Reign of Cambyses II*

When Cyrus II's son Cambyses took the throne in 529 BCE, the obvious next step for the Persian Empire was to continue west. Egypt had long been a prized possession for the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Iran. The kings of both Assyria and Babylonia sought to bring Egyptian territory under their control, and while both managed to do this, neither could maintain power for very long.

So, with Cambyses now at the head of western Asia's most powerful empire, it only makes sense that he would have turned to Egypt as his next target of conquest. However, like his father, he did not start this campaign

until three years after he assumed control of the empire. It's unclear what he was doing, but it's believed tensions on the eastern borders of the Persian Empire kept his attention elsewhere.

Using Palestine and Syria as a path into Egypt, Cambyses and his army took the Gaza road west into Egypt to begin their invasion in 525 BCE. Their first target was the city of Pelusium, which was housing an Egyptian army. A decisive victory sent Egyptian forces running to nearby Memphis, which was the Egyptian capital at the time. The Persians would lay siege to the city, which eventually ended in its demise. The Egyptian king, Psammetichus III, was captured, and Cambyses was officially recognized as the king of Egypt.

On the heel of this victory, Cambyses continued his campaigning into Egypt and other parts of Africa. The kingdoms of Libya and Cyrene submitted to Cambyses, pushing his circle of influence further west. And employing Thebes as a base, he dispatched a massive force to follow the Nile River south into Ethiopia. Most historians think he was looking to extend Persian control as far west as Carthage (modern-day Tunisia), as well as into Ethiopia and to the Oasis of Ammon, known today as the Siwa (Siwah) Oasis (see figure 4).

While the submission of Libya and Cyrene got Cambyses closer to Carthage and Siwa, he did not make it there. The force he sent was stopped, with most records indicating they succumbed to disaster, which was most likely a sandstorm. Cambyses himself would stall in his invasion of Ethiopia. Despite a large force of 50,000 men, Cambyses never managed to reach the Ethiopian capital of Meroe, which would have been necessary if Cambyses had wanted to claim control over the territory. It's unclear exactly why Cambyses could not make it all the way, but the belief is that a combination of the hot, humid Nile river climate and the lack of adequate supplies would have put considerable strain on Cambyses and his soldiers. Nevertheless, Cambyses had made significant additions to the Persian Empire, with its influence now extending throughout Egypt and toward its next most powerful neighbors, Carthage and Ethiopia, although these powers continued to enjoy their independence.

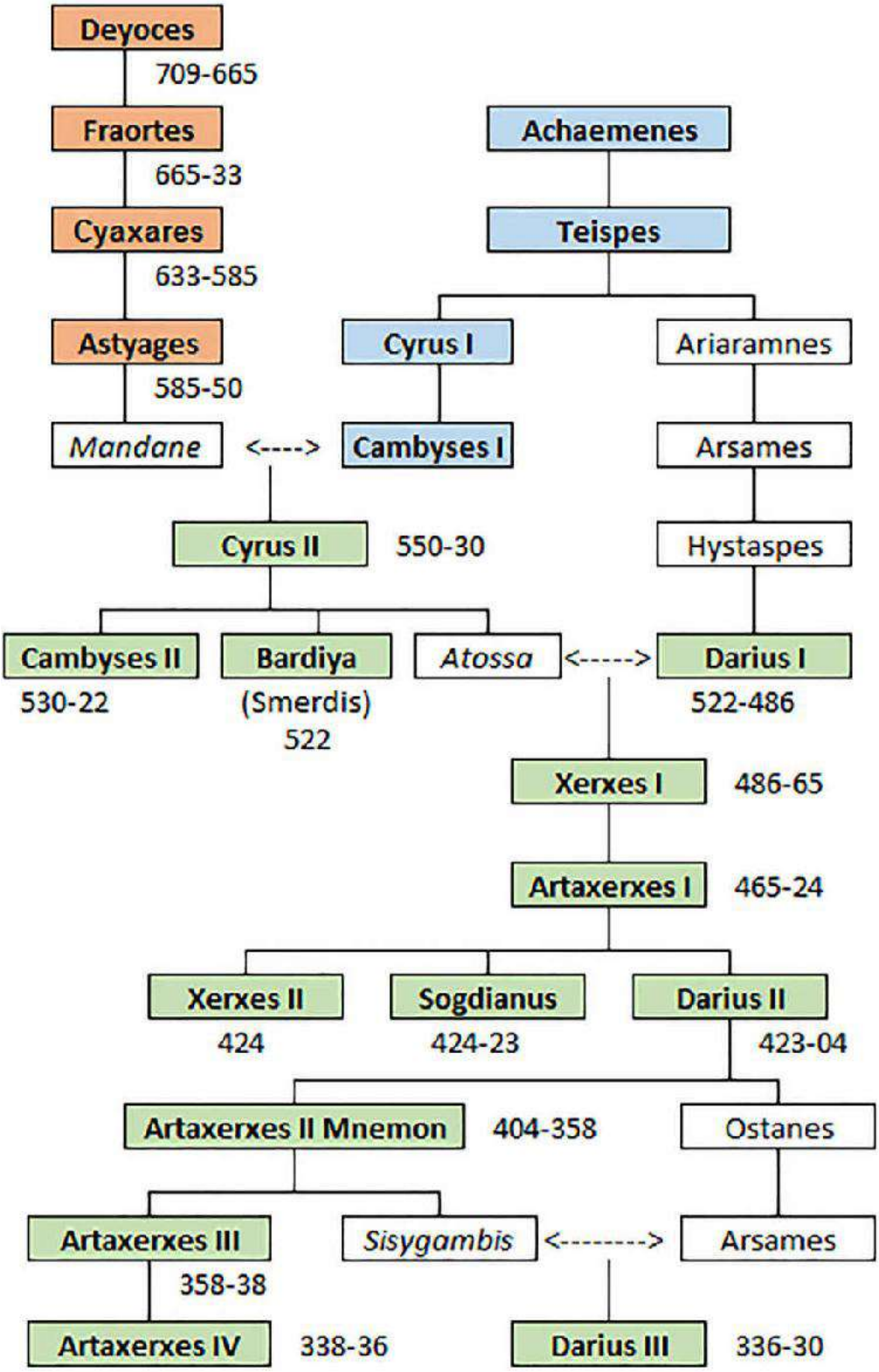
***The Rise of Darius***

Cambyses died in 522 BCE, just seven years after he assumed the throne. But in this short time, he had managed to expand the Persian Empire to its

largest point, meaning his successor would be taking over a growing empire.

However, his death created significant turmoil within the empire that would have a lasting effect on its history. To understand this turmoil, one must place Cambyses' death in a larger context. Specifically, one must understand the rights to govern in Ancient Persia as well as the family tree of the ruling family, as this plays a big part in the stability of the empire.

To begin, remember that Cambyses and Cyrus II are part of the Achaemenid Dynasty, which gets its name from the Achaemenid clan, the most powerful clan and leader of the Pasargadae tribe, which is credited with the founding of the city of Pasargadae and also the unification of the different Persian tribes scattered throughout the Iranian plateau. The name Achaemenid likely comes from Achaemenes, who would have been Cyrus II's great-great-great-great grandfather. Figure 5 shows the Achaemenid family tree.




As a result, the legitimacy of any Persian's claim to the throne depended on his ability to trace his lineage back through the Achaemenid family tree all

the way to Achaemenes himself. The figure above shows that Cyrus II had three children, Cambyses II, who would succeed Cyrus II and expand upon his imperial achievements, Bardiya, and Atossa, who was a woman and therefore disqualified from being able to take over for her father.

Bardiya died in 522 BCE, the same year Cambyses died and Darius I took over as king. But the circumstances surrounding his death are unclear. Some legends say Cambyses II lost his mind and killed his brother, and then died from a battle wound. Whereas other accounts differ, suggesting he died of natural causes. However, no matter what happened, the main point is that Cambyses II died without any clear heir, which naturally sprung the empire into turmoil as different people attempted to assert their right to rule.

Two different men would lay claim to the throne: Darius I and a man named Guatama, who is presumed to be a member of the Persian nobility but who had no real connection to the Achaemenid line. Both men would accuse the other of being a pretender. Guatama claimed he was in fact Bardiya and therefore the true heir of Cyrus II and the Persian throne. However, Darius I claimed Guatama was pretending to be Bardiya, since Bardiya was dead, and that he was using Persian ignorance of this death as a way of legitimizing his claim to the throne. Since Darius I was the oldest living kin of Achaemenes, he believed this was enough to justify his claim to the throne.

But while Darius I was adamant the man claiming to be Bardiya was an impostor, he was initially unable to convince many of the different regions under Persian control that this was the case. Several different kingdoms, such as Babylon, Lydia, and Media, all pledged fealty to Guatama/Bardiya at first. Yet in 522 BCE, Darius, along with the help of several Persian nobles, raided Guatama's capital and killed him, wiping away his claim to the throne and giving Darius I the opportunity to assert himself as the Persian sovereign. But because so many different kingdoms within the Persian Empire had declared fealty to Guatama/Bardiya, this event triggered a series of revolts that would come to define the early stages of Darius I's rule.

However, while brief, the reign of Guatama was quite peculiar, largely because even though Darius considered Guatama to be a pretender, he simultaneously recognized him as king of the land. Writing after the death of Guatama, Darius mentions how he took "his kingdom," making no reference to restoring himself to a kingdom he thought rightfully his. Some

scholars have speculated that this is proof that Darius I was the pretender and that Guatama was indeed Bardiya and therefore a legitimate king, but no one has ever been able to confirm this theory with any degree of certainty.

It's likely, though, that Darius I took this approach as a response to Guatama's popularity. As an attempt to ingratiate himself with the people of the Persian Empire, a move he hoped would help convince them to pledge allegiance to him and to accept his rule, Guatama granted considerable freedoms to the Persian nobility and populace.

For example, he granted all the people in conquered territories freedom from military service and tribute for three years, something that would been welcomed by all. He also set out building temples according to the various religions in the region, and he worked with nobles and other powerful families from around the empire who had fallen in stature since conquest but who were interested in regaining their position of prominence. All of these moves meant that Guatama, although a "false" ruler in that he had not direct relation to Cyrus, became quite popular.

As a result, when Darius I managed to kill Guatama and place himself atop the Persian throne, he found himself in a position where he desperately needed to consolidate his own power, a process that would dominate much of the early part of his rule. Many leaders, such as those in Babylon, saw this as their moment to break free from Persian rule and to obtain their own independence. So, starting in 522 BCE and continuing for the next three years, Darius I would be primarily occupied with defeating the various rebellions that were breaking out across the empire and confirming his position as the one and only Persian king. Later on, once he had managed to bring the different parts of his empire back under his control, he would marry Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus, and the children they bore together would continue the Achaemenid line.

***Darius the Conqueror***

Unlike his two predecessors, Darius I was not as concerned with expanding the empire. The circumstances of his ascension meant he needed to spend considerable time campaigning throughout the interior of the empire so as to consolidate the monarchy. But once he managed to secure his grip on power, he began looking to stretch the limits of Persian influence in the region. However, his gains were significantly more modest than either of

the two kings who came before him as well as the more prominent ones who came after him.

Upon taking the throne, Darius I immediately had to deal with rebellion. His contention claim meant not all provinces of the empire supported him. As a result, his first order of business was tending to unrest in Susiana, the name given to the territory that had previously been the kingdom of Elam, which was in open rebellion.

(Figure 6 shows where Susiana was in relation to Persia and its capital at Pasargadae.)

However, this revolt would not last long, and Darius was able to quell it by sending an army to the city. He entrusted this campaign to his generals and did not accompany them, suggesting he did not consider the chances of defeat to be very high.

The next revolt he had to deal with, though, did a much better job at capturing the attention of Darius I. Babylon, which had declared fealty to Guatama, had hoped to use this climate of political instability to their favor and win their independence back from the Persians. And since Babylon was a powerful city in the region that any emperor looking to expand needed to control, Darius I would have considered this rebellion far more important.

Darius I gathered and led an army into Babylon to quell the rebellion and establish himself as the true ruler of the land. And while the Babylonians put up a stronger resistance compared to the Susians, their revolt did not last long, and by 521 BCE they had surrendered their claims to independence and declared loyalty to Darius I, which once again made Babylon a province of the Persian Empire.

For the next year or so, Darius I would be consumed by his attempts to consolidate his power and bring the kingdoms conquered by Cyrus and Cambyses more firmly under his control. Besides Susiana and Babylon, Darius faced rebellions in Media, Armenia, and within Persia itself. The families who had aligned themselves with Guatama were also using this moment in history as a chance to try and gain more power and autonomy within the empire.

Because of the constant breakout of rebellions during the first few years of Darius I's rule, it was almost as though as soon as he turned to one corner of the empire to put down a rebellion, another one broke out somewhere else. This meant that most of his time as king was spent crisscrossing the empire attempting to put down the various rebellions that started as a result of Guatama's attempt to claim power. However, Darius I's efforts proved largely successful, as he was able to secure the territory under his control and firmly establish himself as the king of Persia. And to make things even more clear, he married Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus II, meaning their children would be able to claim they were direct descendants of this famous king and therefore legitimate rulers of Persia.

The other major concern of Darius I's rule was Egypt. After having recently been conquered by Cambyses, it was up to Darius I to hold power over Egypt in any way possible. And because Egypt was considered to be a conquered territory, the main tactic for maintaining political control was force. Darius I himself did not spend much time in Egypt—he was far too busy working to maintain control of other imperial lands—but he did dedicate quite a bit of military energy to the region. He appointed a general and an admiral to control the army and naval fleet that was stationed in Memphis, giving them the task of upholding Persian rule while Darius was occupied elsewhere.

However, despite force being the primary tactic for consolidating power in Egypt, Darius undertook a number of other policies that demonstrated his understanding of just how difficult it would be to keep this great power

subjugated to Persian rule. For example, he practiced a rather high level of religious tolerance, giving the Egyptians free reign to practice their religion, which would have come as a welcome respite from the rather intolerant policies of Cambyses.

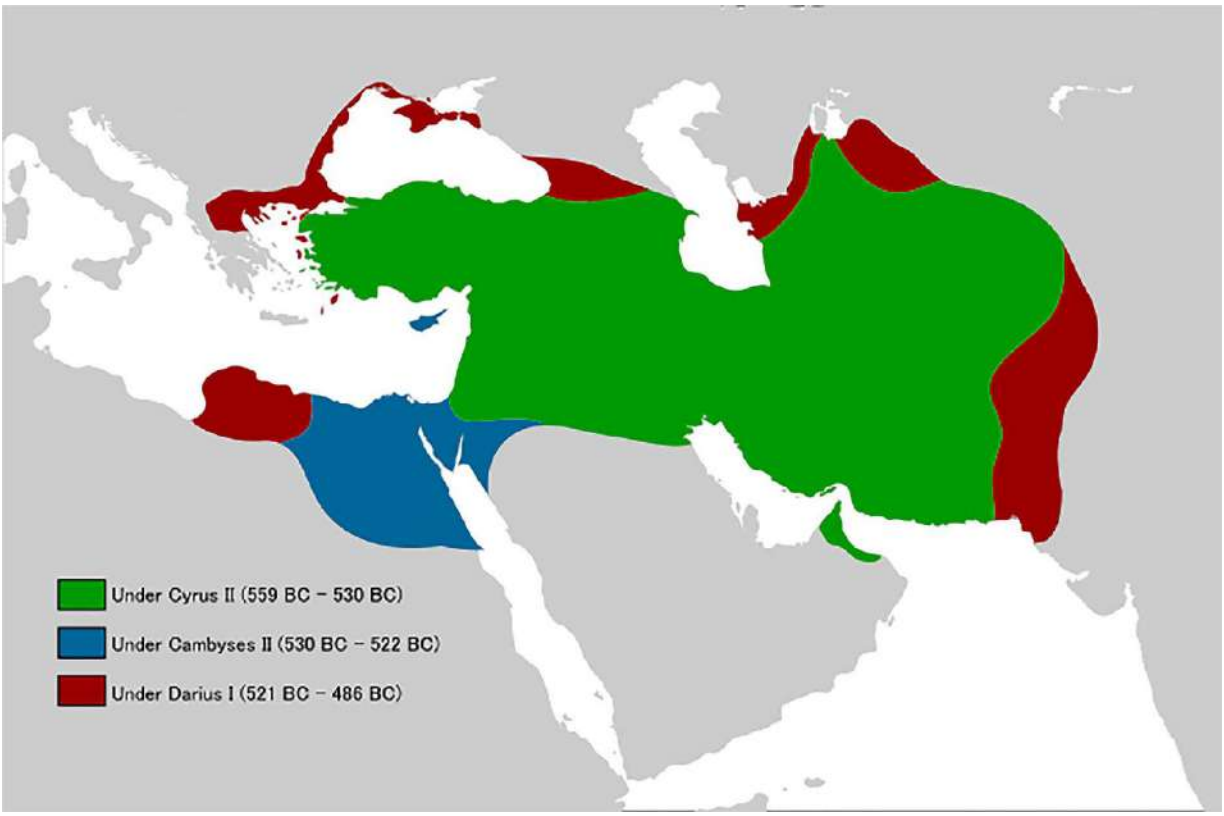
Darius I also invested considerably in the economic welfare of Egypt, primarily by building canals and dams, the most prominent being a canal which connected the Nile to the Red Sea, something that would have opened up trade considerably for the Egyptians. Darius also limited the tribute demands he made on Egyptian kings, which would have reduced the burden of living under Persian rule and kept people from attempting rebellion. These policies in Egypt helped Darius I keep Egypt relatively subdued while his attention was drawn elsewhere in the empire.

But because Darius had to spend so much of his time dealing with rebellions within the empire, he spent little time expanding its borders. This is a common theme when studying major empires throughout history: the empire is expanded by one or two kings, and the next few successors are left with the task of consolidating those gains and strengthening control over newly conquered territories.

However, Darius I did manage to slightly expand the borders of the Persian Empire, although it's best to think of these conquests more as reconquests of territory that either Cyrus or Cambyses had managed to take over but that had wriggled free of Persian control when Cambyses died.

As Figure 7 shows, he was able to push Persian influence closer to Carthage, although he did not quite get all the way there. And he was also able to expand west through Turkey, leaving the Persians at the northern borders of Greek territory. This move would define Persian history in many ways. The next king, Xerxes, spent most of his time attempting to conquer Greece, and the Greco-Persian Wars were a major influence in Persian and world history.

But perhaps Darius' significant achievements as a conqueror took place on the eastern frontiers of the empire. His armies reached as far east as the Indus River, and Darius was able to extract tribute from the kings ruling in those territories, bringing the Persians as far east as they would ever manage to go.




***The Greco-Persian Wars***

As the two most powerful kingdoms in western Asia and the Fertile Crescent, Greek and Persian history, especially during the Achaemenid Dynasty, are closely intertwined. Greece was always a target for the Persian conquerors of the Achaemenid Dynasty, largely because it, along with Egypt, was the most culturally advanced in the region. The successes of Cyrus II and Cambyses II in invading both gave Darius I, hope for being able to finally conquer the Greek city-states and bring them under the control of the Persian Empire.

However, the Greeks had other plans, and the series of battles and revolts that took place during the first half of the 5th century BCE are known as the Greco-Persian Wars. Various cities and kingdoms aligned themselves with each side, turning this conflict into a bloody, long-lasting war that would dramatically reshape the power structures in the region and subsequently the history of both civilizations.

To understand this war, which is best understood as a series of heightened military conflicts between Greece and Persia (we could look at it as a series of wars, but in historical context they all belong to one conflict), it's important to remember the nature of Greece at this time. While the Greeks

would soon form one of the largest empires in the history of the world, at this point in time there was no unified Greece. Instead, Greece was best understood as a combination of city-states that shared a language. Commerce was a defining characteristic of early Greek civilization, with these large, influential city-states engaging in considerable trade amongst themselves. Because of this, several of these city-states became rather wealthy and powerful on their own, making it difficult for the Persians to effectively exert control over them.

The year 499 BCE is generally regarded as the beginning of the Greco-Persian Wars. This was the year when Aristagoras, the tyrant king of the Greek city-state Miletus, which is on the western coast of Anatolia, combined forces with Darius I to invade and conquer the island of Naxos. However, this failed, and Aristagoras knew that Darius I would likely punish him and maybe even remove him from power as a result of his failed military campaign. So, in an attempt to retain his own power, Aristagoras turned on Darius I and encouraged all the peoples of Hellenic (Greek) Asia Minor to revolt against the Persians. He was largely successful, and this started a period known as the Ionian Revolts, which lasted until 493 BCE.

But these revolts would not end without first causing serious harm to Persian power in the region. Aristagoras was able to secure military support for his actions from both Athens and Eretria, and together they managed to sack and burn the Persian capital in Asia Minor, Sardis.

This move obviously sparked a good deal of anger from Darius I, and he set out to avenge his lost territory. Because Athens and Eritrea had joined with Aristagoras in the attack, this set the Persian king's sights firmly on mainland Greece. The first target in Darius I's campaign was Miletus itself, the center of Aristagoras' power, and after several years of stalemate, Darius I was able to beat the Ionians (the term used for the Greeks settled along the western coast of Asia Minor) at the decisive Battle of Lade.

Determined to fully punish those who had been responsible for the political upheaval in Ionia and Asia Minor, Darius I began to plan a full-scale invasion of Greece with the goal of conquering those who lent support to Aristagoras, Athens and Eretria. Darius I gave leadership of the Greek campaign to General Mardonius, who succeeded in bringing the cities of Thrace and Macedon back under Persian control. He was then beaten back in his attempts to advance, bringing his progress to a halt in 490 BCE.

The Persians set to the seas and sailed across the Aegean, and during this campaign they were able to conquer Cyclades, and they were even able to capture Eretria, burning it to the ground. Having succeeded in entering deep into Greek territory in less than 10 years after the beginning of the Ionian Revolts, the Persians continued their march toward Athens. Yet, they were met by the Athenians and fought the Battle of Marathon, which the Greeks won, effectively stopping the Persians in their tracks. Figure 8 shows a map of the various movements of the Persian and Greek armies during the Ionian Revolts and subsequent Greco-Persian Wars.

After his defeat at the Battle of Marathon, Darius I began to regather his forces for a second attempt at an invasion, but he died in 486 BCE, leaving the responsibility of Greek conquest to his son, Xerxes. But these events would end up having a significant impact on the future of both the Greeks and the Persians. For one, it helped solidify anti-Persian sentiment among the Greeks. For example, Sparta, which had remained relatively neutral during the conflicts, now came out and declared a desire to free the Greek people from Persian bother. They would join forces with Athens and other

Greek city-states to form the Delian League, which would play a crucial role in attempting to undermine Persian power throughout its entire empire by inciting rebellion and waging war.

The Delian League would be active for the next 30 or so years, and their part of the story ends when the League failed to incite an effective coup in Egypt. By 450 BCE, the Greco-Persian Wars slowly cooled and eventually ended, but not before both cultures had dramatically influenced each other's history. The reign of Xerxes would be almost entirely defined by his campaigns against Greece, but this period of Persian history is best understood within the entire context of Xerxes' rule, something that is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

### *Darius I the King*

While Darius I's accomplishments as a conqueror are not nearly as impressive as those of his predecessors, this was not the most important thing to come out of his reign. Possibly due to the struggles he faced in consolidating and establishing his power, Darius I was particularly concerned with the organization of the empire and in establishing systems and institutions that would make it easier for both him and future kings to hold dominion over their territory. What Darius I came up with ended up being a rather advanced form of political organization that would continue to be used even after the fall of the Achaemenid Dynasty to Alexander the Great and the Greeks in the 4th century BCE.

The first decision Darius I made as king in terms of the empire's organization was which type of government to use. Darius I gathered his closest advisers to discuss what would be the best way for establishing and maintaining control over what had now become a vast, expansive empire. Darius I was in favor of a monarchy, whereas some of his advisers advocated for a republic, and some even came out in support of an oligarchy. In the end, Darius I was able to convince his counsel, and the Persian government officially became an absolute monarchy with Darius I as its sovereign. This monarchy would be hereditary, something that would have been important to Persians at the time, as evidenced by both Darius I and Guatama's attempt to establish their Achaemenid lineage.

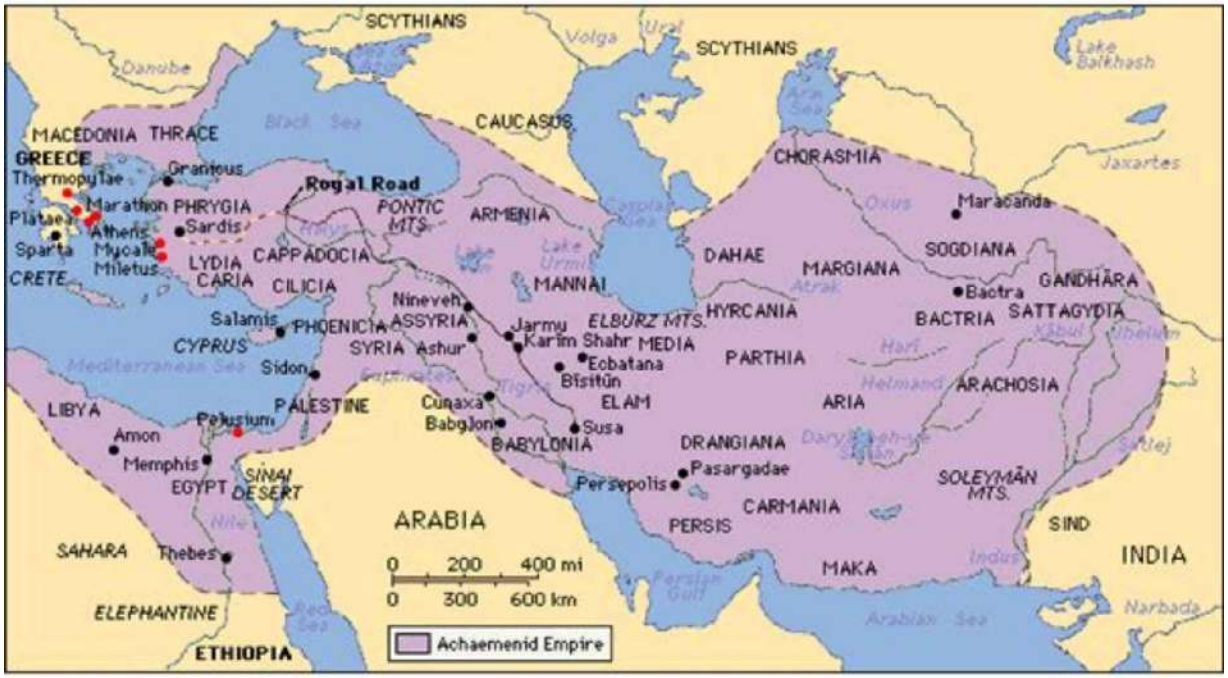
The next decision he needed to make was where to place his capital. Pasargadae had been the capital of Cyrus II, but shortly after ascending to the throne, Darius I began constructing palaces and temples in Persepolis in

521 BCE, which was not too far to the north of Pasargadae. Part of the reason both of these kings chose to build their capitals in this region is that this was considered the Persian core territory. Choosing these locations as the center of the empire would have been a source of great pride for the Persians living in that territory, and since the Persian kings depended on the Persians themselves to form their vast armies and conduct their extensive military campaigns, pleasing these people would have been a top priority for both Cyrus II and Darius I.

But while it made symbolic and cultural sense to build the Persian capital deep in the heart of Persis, it did not make much sense in terms of the administration of the empire. Both cities were hidden away among the mountainous terrain of the Iranian plateau, which would have made them difficult to connect to the rest of the empire. As a result, Darius I began constructing another capital at the same time Persepolis was being build.

This city, Susa, located in northwestern Iran, was much closer to the large political and cultural centers of the Persian Empire, Babylon and Ecbatana (the former capital of the Median Empire and an important city for the administration of the empire and the lands formerly controlled by the Medes). It would have been much easier to connect Susa to the network of roads that had been built throughout western Asia, making it much easier for the monarch to communicate with his generals and governors who would have been spread throughout Persian-controlled territory. However, Persepolis would remain the cultural center of the empire, and while Darius I chose to be buried there, he would have spent almost no time in the city.

The other major thing Darius I did was organize the empire into satrapies, which were essentially provinces. Most records indicate Darius created 20 different satrapies throughout the empire, the most prominent being centered in Egypt (Memphis), Babylon, Arabia, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Ecbatana and Media, and Bactria, which is the territory to the northeast of Persia in modern-day Afghanistan. Figure 9 shows a map of what the Persian Empire would have looked like under Darius I. At this time, the Achaemenid Dynasty-controlled Persia was at its largest point in history.




While the division of his administration into provinces was nothing new, Darius I did two things that set him apart and helped him secure a stronger grip on power. First, he gave satraps (the leaders of the satrapies) rather significant freedom in the management of their provinces. While the king's word was law in all the land, the satraps were capable of speaking on behalf of the king, serving as the high judge in the region. Furthermore, the satraps were independently responsible for securing their territory. Revolts or rebellions were dealt with directly by the satraps, and this may have allowed for more effective responses; previous empires in the regions, namely Assyria, launched military campaigns and deported large numbers of people whenever there was a rebellion. But the Persians favored a more localized response, which would have helped quiet hostilities toward the king in Persia.

The second thing Darius I did in setting up his satrapies and government was to enact a policy of religious tolerance. The Persian Empire at the time of Darius I stretched as far west as Asia Minor and even parts of mainland Greece, down to Egypt, Libya, and Sudan, across Arabia and Mesopotamia, and all the way east to the Indus River. As a result, there was a great deal of diversity in terms of cultural and religious traditions. And instead of attempting to crush these and replace them with Persian customs, Darius I left people's cultures intact and even contributed to their growth by

assisting in the building of temples and other buildings that would have facilitated worship.

These two features of the Persian government—decentralization and tolerance—were not nearly as prominent in other western Asian governments, and it's likely this helped contribute to the rise of Persian dominance. Previous empires in the region, such as Assyria or Babylon, struggled to maintain political stability largely because of the vast regional diversity. However, Darius I was able to set up a system that left regional customs intact but that also allowed for Darius I to easily and effectively assert his power over the various dominions of the empire.

***Conclusion***

The significance of the rules of Cambyses II and Darius I cannot be overlooked. While Cambyses II only ruled for seven years, he was successful in following his father, Cyrus the Great, in expanding the reaches of the empire further west into Africa and parts of southeastern Europe. Darius I's much longer, yet somewhat less eventful, rule helped to consolidate these gains and set up a system of government that would allow the Persian Empire to flourish as western Asia's greatest power. At the time of Darius I's death and the ascension of his son Xerxes, the empire was at its largest point and poised for further growth.

Yet the Achaemenid Dynasty's power was rapidly reaching its apex, and before too long it would begin to fall apart until it eventually fell in the 4$^{th}$ century BCE to the Greeks. However, this would not happen until after the Persians managed to cement themselves as a regional power that would stand the test of time, and also contribute significantly to the cultural development of not only the region but the entire ancient world.

# Chapter 4 – The Beginning of the End: The Reign of Xerxes and the Downfall of the Achaemenid Dynasty

Perhaps the most famous of all of the Persian kings, Xerxes the Great rose to the throne after his father. Two generations of rule, starting with Cyrus II and continuing through to Darius I, had expanded the Persian Empire to its largest point. It was undoubtedly the most powerful civilization in western Asia, and the Greco-Persian Wars indicated that Europe was not safe either. However, Xerxes would depart from some of the policies enacted by his father. This would help to amplify his power and importance, but it also increased the chances of regional revolt and dissension, a common "thorn in the side" of nearly all ancient rulers.

As a result of this policy change that was designed to help consolidate power, the power of the Persians, or more specifically the Achaemenids, was beginning to slip ever so slightly, even though Xerxes inherited an empire at its peak. He would not lose considerable territory, but he would not make large gains either. And his famed failure in invading Greece and Europe would dramatically alter the course of Persian history. But despite his eccentricities and only modest successes, Xerxes was still the most powerful man in all of western Asia, and he would go down as one of the most formidable kings in the history of humanity.

### *Xerxes Ascends to the Throne and Secures His Empire*

It was Persian tradition that the king name a successor before embarking on a long military campaign, and so the decision to name Xerxes crown prince came when Darius I's son was still just a boy. The decision to name Xerxes as his heir was somewhat surprising considering Xerxes was not Darius I's oldest son, since Persian tradition called for appointing the eldest son as the heir to a father's wealth and titles. This was because Darius I's oldest son was not born into royalty. Instead, he came about from a relationship Darius I had with a commoner before he himself became king. But shortly after winning the throne from Guatama the Pretender, Darius I married Cyrus II's daughter, Atossa, and their first child, Xerxes, was considered to be Darius I's eldest royal son, making him the ideal choice to take over the kingdom.

As crown prince, Xerxes would lead the satrapy of Babylon. He was given the title king of Babylon, and this was used as his training for when he would eventually become king of the entire empire.

Some of the behavior of Xerxes, such as repurposing religious buildings in Persepolis to become harems, suggest that the Persian kingdom was beginning to mature. Three straight kings had been able to conquer and hold large swaths of territory, and this allowed the royalty to become quite rich. They spent these riches on their cities and palaces, attempting to build them up to be fitting of the splendor of the larger empire.

But just because the Persian Empire had grown significantly in power and size since the time of Cyrus II, it did not mean that Xerxes inherited a unified country at peace with itself. His father's campaigns into Greece had been stalled after his defeat at the Battle of Marathon, and while he was regrouping for a second invasion, revolt broke out in Egypt. And to the east, the Bactrians, named for the province of Bactra, a region located to the east of Persia in the modern-day nations of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, were also creating unrest and threatening to try and break free from Persian rule.

Because of their close proximity, revolt in Egypt was also usually followed by revolt in Jerusalem. And this was also the case in 485 BCE when Xerxes was ascending to the Persian throne. As a result, his first act as king would be to move against Palestine and Egypt to quell their rebellion and bring both regions back under firm control. By 484 BCE, Xerxes and his armies marched across Palestine and through Gaza to Egypt, and they were able to quickly and effectively put down the revolt that had broken out.

However, despite how quickly this campaign began and ended, Xerxes' actions in Egypt would have a lasting effect on the empire and its ability to control the regions its kings had conquered. This starts with Xerxes' response to this Egyptian revolt, as it shows a departure from the ruling style of his father, Darius I.

Darius I showed great respect for Egyptian religion and customs, and he went out of his way to make sure they had the chance to practice their culture. He recognized and even honored some of the Egyptian gods, and he even went so far as to take an Egyptian god-king name for himself so as to keep in line with Egyptian understanding of monarchical rule. However, Xerxes was not nearly as tolerant, choosing instead to reject the religious

practices of the Egyptians and to try and get them to adjust to Persian customs. These efforts were largely unsuccessful and would make it difficult for Xerxes to maintain tight control over the Egyptians.

The other major issues Xerxes had to deal with upon gaining power was Babylon. Since he had served as viceroy in this ancient capital while his father was king, Xerxes initially had no trouble in securing support for his claim to be the sovereign in Babylon. However, a curious decision to change the titles associated with the Persian king helped stir some doubt about the legitimacy of Xerxes' claim to power.

Because of its historical significance in the region, the Persian kings before Xerxes would refer to themselves, especially and perhaps only when addressing the Babylonian people, as "King of Babylon, king of lands." This was in part to try and pay respect to this ancient power, but it was also a strategic move; all empires in Mesopotamia and western Asia needed a plan for how they would appease the kings and citizens of Babylon. And since Babylon was at its lowest point in terms of regional power when Persia rose to prominence, these small formalities were enough to keep the Babylonians content.

However, when Xerxes became king, he would quickly do an about-face, and this would have a major effect on the beginning of his rule. As viceroy, he had managed to gain considerable support, and there was no contest to his claim to the throne at first. But when addressing the Babylonians in the early days of his kingship, he referred to himself as Xerxes, "King of Parsa (Persia) and Mada (Media)," choosing to relegate "King of Babylon, king of lands" to the end of his title, something that would have been greatly insulting to the Babylonian people, especially their rulers.

Some scholars speculate that this move was not folly, but rather an intentional move to try and strip Babylon of some of its independence. After what had just happened in Egypt, Xerxes was likely beginning to doubt the effectiveness of his father's hands-off policies, and this humiliation of the Babylonians may have had the intended effect of reasserting himself as the one and only sovereign in Babylon.

No matter the intention, the effect of Xerxes' decision was initially chaos. Seeing a break in the people's fealty to Xerxes, a powerful member of the Babylonian nobility, Belshimanni, rose up and attempted to claim independence for Babylon and its people. He addressed himself as "King of

Babylon, king of lands," a clear attempt to ingratiate himself with the Babylonian people in a way Xerxes had refused to do. Belshimanni started by storming the Persian installations in Babylon, and he managed to reach and kill the satrap that had been appointed by Xerxes to manage Babylon and its surrounding territories.

Fortunately for Xerxes, and unfortunately for Belshimanni, the Persian king, who was in Ecbatana at the time, had access to his best general, his brother-in-law, Megabyzus. Under command of Xerxes, he took an army to Babylon and quickly destroyed Belshimanni and his rebellion. He moved swiftly and decisively, taking Babylon back in just a matter of days. And then he set about to punish the Babylonians for their insurrection. He destroyed the city wall, tore down temples and other religious buildings, and he also melted down the 18-foot gold statue of Bel Marduk, one of the Babylonian's most important gods, into bullion, killing all the priests and other people who attempted to protest it.

This prompt change in policy regarding how the different satraps would be managed began to reshape the direction of Persian history. As one might expect, it began to sow the seeds for rebellion throughout the empire, which any student of ancient history knows is the beginning of the end. And with Xerxes about to mount a massive invasion of Greece and Europe, the destiny of the Achaemenid Dynasty is slowly beginning to come into question. But for those living contemporaneously, it would not have seemed this way. The Persian army was still as strong as ever, and Xerxes' harsh response to insurrection would have struck fear in people across the empire, discouraging dissent and strengthening Xerxes' control over western Asia.

***Xerxes Moves on Greece***

What's interesting about Xerxes, and something that separates him quite a bit from his father Darius I and his uncle Cambyses, is that he was not particularly interested in conquest. Xerxes would have been the first Persian king to be born into the tremendous splendor that came from the imperial gains made by his forefathers, so it's only natural he concerned himself with other interests, namely the fortification of his power and the glorification of his wealth within the empire.

For example, once Xerxes took over as king, he immediately began overseeing the massive construction projects started by his father. He put finishing touches on the palaces that had been started by Darius I in

Babylon and Susa, and he also went to work completing the splendid terraces surrounding his father's principal palace in Persepolis.

But despite his aversion to conquest and war, Xerxes would be unable to avoid a military campaign. And the obvious location for Xerxes' primary campaign was Greece and Europe. Darius I had intensified the Greco-Persian Wars by retaliating to the Ionian Revolts with a full-scale invasion of Greece. He managed to make it onto the Greek mainland and was headed for Athens when he was stopped and driven back across the Aegean Sea to Anatolia and Asia Minor.

However, it would take some convincing to get Xerxes to commit to a full-scale invasion of Greece, and also a little trickery. Persian diplomats who had been living in Athens had been exiled after Darius I's failed invasion. Desiring revenge, they hired an already discredited oracle to come and speak to Xerxes about the need to invade the Greeks again, and Xerxes' cousin, Mardonius, who was eager to get himself named satrap, egged Xerxes on, for newly conquered territory would have meant a need for new satraps.

As a result, Xerxes' destiny was altered and he began to turn his attention away from his personal enrichment and toward the expansion of the empire. Knowing how difficult it would be to successfully invade Greece and learning from his father's mistakes, Xerxes began planning a gradual advance that would take time and resources but that would also greatly increase his chances of success. For the invasion, he summoned the naval fleets of Egypt, Phoenicia, and the conquered Greeks in Asia Minor. (Yes—the Greeks would have fought the Greeks. Punishment for denying military service was severe, and it would have helped create this somewhat unnatural situation.) And Xerxes also called upon half of his standing army; three of the six army corps were deployed, each being made up of around 60,000 men. So, in total, Xerxes had an army of around 180,000 men at his command for the invasion of Greece.

The other thing Xerxes did to help increase his chances of success during his invasion was to construct a vast supply line for his armies. Markets and trade posts were set up along the Thracian coast to store grain and facilitate the movement of supplies needed to move such a large group of people around the Aegean Sea and down into Greece. This move showed Xerxes' prowess as a military commander, for he was willing to spend the time

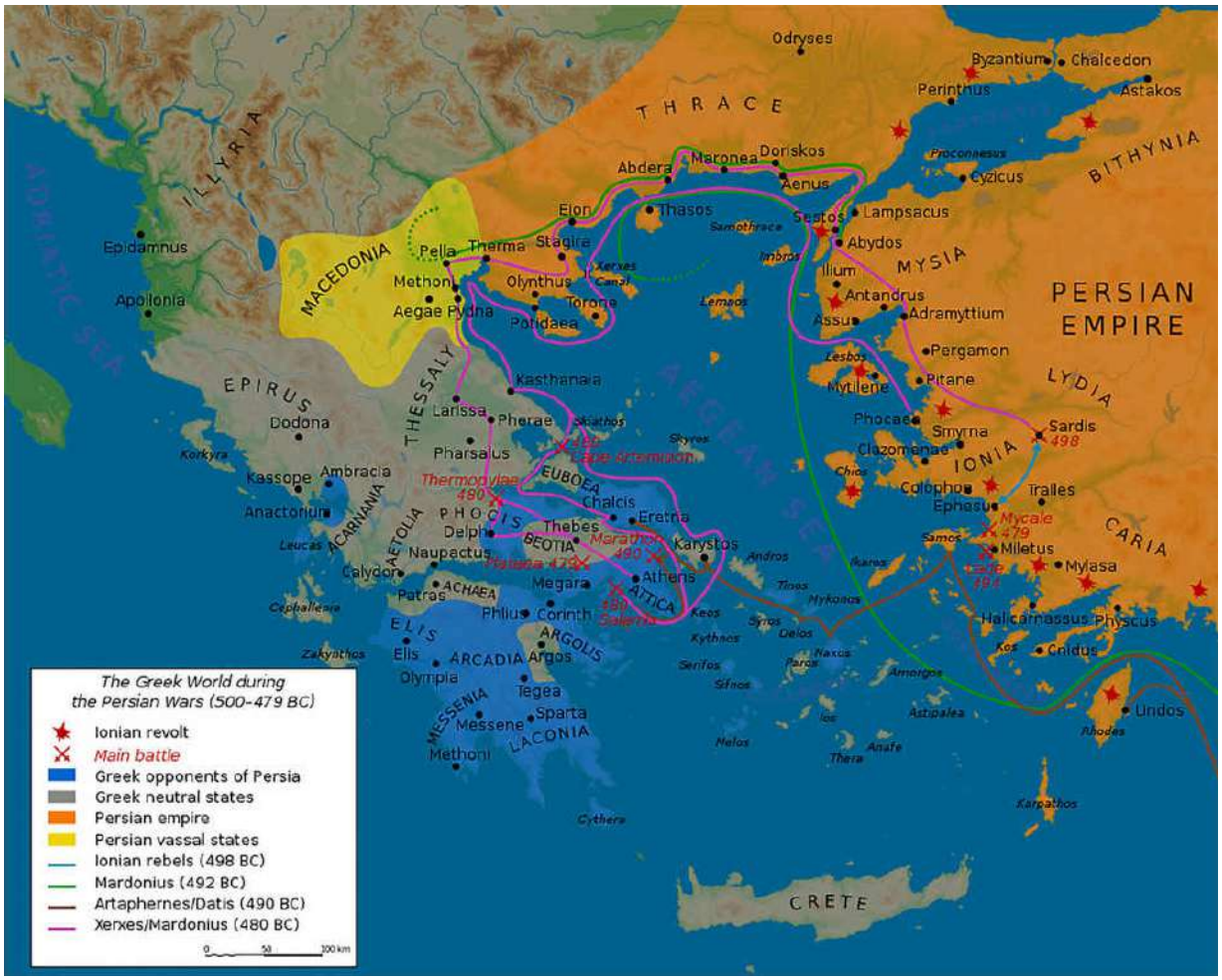
needed to make a proper invasion of Greece, instead of rushing into conflict and risking a swift and humiliating defeat.

His movement through Asia Minor and over into Greece was slow and gradual, and therefore not hidden from the Greeks. Word spread quickly of a massive force led by a man "more powerful than Zeus" heading their way to conquer them. Obviously fearful of this impending threat to their independence, the Greeks began to scramble to put together a defense. Since most of the Greeks who had settled in Asia Minor and Africa had already been conquered by the Persians and were in fact fighting in their armies and navies against their kinsman, often by the Persian use of the lash, the remaining independent city-states had few if any allies willing to contribute to their defense.

The northern parts of Greece, south of Macedonia and west of Delphi and Athens, were able to remain neutral, and since they had no part in the original cause of the Greco-Persian Wars (the Ionian revolts), they were not a primary concern of Xerxes and the Persians.

But all of this meant the Greeks were hopelessly alone. Threatened city-states, such as Sparta, Athens, Delphi, and Eretria attempted to form an alliance, but this was stunted by the unwillingness of the oracles to permit war against the Persians. Nearly all records of soothsayers at the time indicate that Greek priests wanted the Greek armies and leaders to abandon their land and surrender to the Persians. Even if one doesn't believe in oracles, it's no surprise this was the recommendation. The Greeks were standing alone against perhaps the largest army ever assembled.

By 480 BCE, Xerxes and his troops were marching along the Thracian coast, with his large naval fleet accompanying them and helping them cross difficult terrain wherever necessary. They moved into Macedonia and headed south toward Greece (Figure 11 shows a map of Persian troop movements during this part of the Greco-Persian Wars). Greek scouts who were captured were usually taken in and shown the immensity of the Persian army so that they could return to their leaders and report on what they saw, an attempt to solicit Greek submission before the invasion. However, this did not work, and it appeared the Greeks were going to stand up and fight for their independence, although all indications showed that they were setting up for a quick and conclusive defeat.




By the end of 480 BCE, Xerxes and his armies and fleets had made it to Salamis, an island just off the coast of Athens. He appeared to be in an ideal position to force the surrounding city-states to accept surrender terms, which would have left Athens all but defeated. However, Xerxes listened to his advisers and instead launched an offensive in the straits of Salamis. Ground troops were approaching from the north, and they were met by a small contingent of Greek soldiers at the Pass of Thermopylae. Here the Greeks were essentially slaughtered, although references to the battle in pop culture (the movie *300*), suggest otherwise. The Greeks were also defeated at Artemisium, despite being reinforced by those fleeing the Battle of Thermopylae. These Persian victories led to the conquest of Greek city-states such as Phocis, Boeotia, Attica, and Euboea, which gave Persia a significant stronghold into Greece, threatening Athens.

The Greek response was to engage the Persian naval fleet at the Straits of Salamis, a narrow stretch of water just off the coast of Athens. This took the Greeks out of Athens and put them on an offensive against the Persians,

who were at the island of Salamis likely preparing for an invasion of Athens. This move by the Greeks gave them greater control over the conditions of engagement, which put them at an advantage. The Persians greatly outnumbered the Greeks, but attacking instead of waiting to be attacked paid off. The small space within which they had to operate proved to be a great hindrance to their success. Persian troops had trouble staying organized and keeping formation, and this meant the much smaller Athenian fleet was able to mount an attack that resulted in a decisive victory for the Greeks, dramatically reshaping the course of the war.

However, the impact of the Battle of Salamis was not felt so much in terms of the Persian military. Overall, the Persians had suffered modest defeats. And after their victories at Thermopylae and Artemisium, the army was still intact and in good position to continue its advance southward toward Athens. But what did change as a result of the Battle of Salamis was Xerxes. It was he who ordered the attack on the Athenians, meaning he had no one to blame for the loss, but immediately after the defeat, he had his Phoenician naval captains executed on grounds of cowardice. Horrified by this cruel and irrational response to what was nothing more than a normal naval defeat, the Phoenicians and Egyptians both abandoned Xerxes and returned home, drastically reducing the size of the fleet he had at his disposal and opening the door for the allied Greek city-states to launch a counteroffensive the next year, which would effectively end the Persian advance into Greece and mark the beginning of the Greek offensive into Persia.

The other major development that came from defeat at Salamis was that Xerxes, who we must remember was not particularly warlike from the beginning, left the battlefield and retreated to Sardis—the capital of Persia's Asia Minor satrap. He left Mardonius to control the army, which in other circumstances would have been a smart move, given Mardonius' record as a proven military general more adept than Xerxes. Leaving him in command would have increased Persian chances for success, largely because Xerxes as a military leader was more of a liability than an advantage. .

The following year, 479 BCE, the Persians were still in a good position to finish their conquest. Half of the Greek city-states were under Persian control, and the allied forces did not have the numbers to beat the Persians. But there was still resistance to their rule. Greek advisers to Maradonius

suggested he forgo military campaigns in favor of diplomacy, suggesting he use bribery as a means of winning the support of the Greek political elite, which would have made it much easier to win the favor of the Greek people.

However, Maradonius ignored this advice and instead chose to attack at both Platea and Mycale. But before doing this, Maradonius had taken steps to consolidate the army. Instead of relying on a massive force of conscripts taken from various parts of the empire, he sent all but one army corps home, and his remaining force was made up of only Iranians, i.e., Persians, Medes, Bactrians, and Indians, as well as Persian Immortals (a special class of professional Persian soldier which will be discussed further in Chapter 6). He believed Iranians to be stronger and more effective soldiers, and therefore felt success was more likely if he reduced the size of his force and made use of only the "best" soldiers. And he would have liked his chances even more considering he thought the Greek soldiers to be weak and ineffective, a sign of Persian military ignorance.

But the decision to attack instead of using diplomacy, along with the disregard for the ability of Greek soldiers, led to defeat at both Platea and Mycale, meaning that by the end of 479 BCE, the Persians had effectively been defeated in Greece. And as discontent began to break out in western Asia, the Persian army needed to leave Europe and attend to other matters in the empire.

There is a general consensus among historians that the Persians should have won this war. They vastly outnumbered the Greeks, and the alliance formed between the Greek city-states was weak and disorganized. Xerxes started out in the right direction by supplying his army and moving gradually into Greek territory, making sure the navy supported the army the whole way. However, some fluke defeats, followed by Xerxes' descent into madness, and then a series of military blunders by his chief commander meant the European campaign ended in defeat.

This marks an important turning point in Persian history. The Persian retreat gave the Greeks the chance to reorganize, and over the course of the next century, they would slowly come together and strengthen. This period of fortification reached a climax when the Greeks, led by Alexander the Great, eventually rode into Persia and conquered it, resulting in the fall of the Achaemenid Dynasty and the Persian Empire they controlled.

However, the implications of the Persian defeat extend much further. The Greeks would go on after this to make significant contributions to world culture in fields ranging from science and math to philosophy and the arts. However, had the Persians succeeded in wiping them off the map in the 5th century BCE, then much of this may have never happened, which would have made today's world a much different place.

***The Decline of Xerxes and Persian Power***

Although once considered a promising crown prince, and also a hopeful military commander, Xerxes returned from Greece a changed man. He was no longer as interested in expanding the empire, or even building upon his palace. Instead, he fell deep into harem life, leaving much of the management of his empire to his advisers and satraps.

A particularly low moment for Xerxes came when he was in Sardis after retreating from Greece: he fell in love with his brother's wife. And when she rejected his advances, he decided to marry his son to her daughter, hoping this would help him win over her favor. However, soon after, Xerxes changed his focused from his brother's wife to his son's, and these actions repulsed most of his court.

On top of this, Xerxes embarked on an aggressive taxation campaign that would have put considerable stress on the entire empire. While Persia had long since been exempt from paying taxes, the rest of the empire was not. And seeking to consolidate his power even further, he raised the tribute expectations for kingdoms across the lands he controlled.

This quickly drained much of the gold and silver from the empire, which Xerxes had melted down and stored in his palace in Persepolis. And it also helped to sow discontent throughout the empire, which the Greeks, eager to continue their resistance to Egyptian rule as well as push their influence further into Asia, were willing to fund and support through the Delian League.

The last 15 years of Xerxes' rule was relatively uneventful, and his increasing incompetence as a ruler led to his assassination in 465 BCE. He would be succeeded by his son, Artaxerxes I, who would promptly need to deal with the effects of his father's failures, which were manifesting mainly as a widespread revolt in Egypt.

The Egyptians were being supported in their attempt to rebel by the Athenians, and in an effort to try and diminish their influence in the

conflict, Artaxerxes I began funding the Athenians' enemies in Greece, a move that prompted them to move their treasury and once again focus on their efforts against the Persians. However, all of this proved unsuccessful. Artaxerxes was able to quell the rebellion in Egypt, effectively ending Athenian and Delian League support of the insurrection there. The Persians continued to fight the Athenians, led by their leader Cimon, throughout Asia Minor, until the Battle of Cyprus in 450 BCE, which provided little gains to either side. Seeing that this constant war was going nowhere, Cimon and Artaxerxes I agreed to what is known as the Peace of Callias, which effectively ended the Greco-Persian Wars.

Artaxerxes I would reign in relative peace until his death in 424 BCE, at which point the monarchy would enter a period of extreme instability. Artaxerxes had only one legitimate son, Xerxes II, and he was promptly named king after the death of his father. However, days after being named king, he was killed by his illegitimate half-brother, Sogdianus, who days later was killed by his half-brother, Ochus. In an attempt to establish himself as the rightful heir to the monarchy, Ochus took the royal name Darius II. His claim was contested, and he spent most of his time putting down rebellions throughout the empire.

His death, just 12 years later, again created a chaotic situation at the head of the Persian Empire. Darius II's wife, Queen Parysatis, begged her husband to name not their eldest son, Artaxerxes II, to the throne, but rather their next oldest, Cyrus the Younger. She failed, and Artaxerxes II assumed the throne. He had his brother Cyrus the Younger arrested, and he had scheduled for his execution, although Parysatis intervened and prevented it from happening.

### *Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III: The Final Glory of the Achaemenid Empire*

The ascension of Artaxerxes II in 412 BCE put an end to the turmoil that had defined the Persian Empire since the death of Xerxes in 467 BCE. He would rule for the next 45 years and help restore peace and stability to the empire. But this did not mean his reign was uneventful. In fact, it was defined once again by insurrection and revolt, and most of his military campaigns were dedicated to reestablishing his grip on power.

The first issue he had to deal with was the revolt of Egypt. This was hardly the first time the Egyptians seized the opportunity presented by a change in

monarch to try and win their independence, but it was one of the first times they succeeded in doing so. Artaxerxes spent time gathering a force to try and reconquer it in 373 BCE, but this failed, and he was forced to accept that Egypt would no longer be a part of the Persian Empire.

But once again, the Greeks were beginning to antagonize the Persians. This time, however, it wasn't the Athenians but rather the Spartans who were in opposition to Persia. They had invaded Asia Minor, the beginning point for most Greco-Persian conflicts. Yet Artaxerxes did not want to engage them directly, choosing instead to fund the Spartan's main enemy, the Athenians, who less than a century earlier had been in direct conflict with the Persians. This tied the two Greek city-states up in conflict with each other, but Artaxerxes II would shake things up by turning on his Athenian allies and making a treaty with Sparta that gave control over the cities of Ionia and Aeolis on the Anatolian coast back to the Persians.

Another revolt broke out in 372, which is known as the Revolt of the Satraps, in which provincial governors from Armenia, Cappadocia (a region in Turkey), and Phyrigia (also in Turkey) joined together to try and overthrow Artaxerxes II. This resulted in a war that ended with the satraps' defeat in 362 BCE.

Artaxerxes II was not an expansionist. While he attempted to regain control of territories lost to revolt, he was not interested in extending Persian power, and when he lost Egypt, he seemed willing to accept this defeat. However, his effectiveness in putting down the various revolts that broke out during his time as king helped bring stability and economic prosperity to the empire.

He spent a good deal of energy building up Persian cities and expanding the palaces in Susa, as well as moving his capital back to Persepolis and dedicating resources to its development. Furthermore, and this might be Artaxerxes II's most significant cultural achievement, he oversaw the expansion of Zoroastrianism, the religion that had become the official Persian religion under Artaxerxes I, and which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7. The shrines he built to the Zoroastrian gods and prophets are some of the more remarkable architectural accomplishments of the Persian Empire. Because of his lack of conquest and expansion, Artaxerxes II is not considered to be one of the more glorious Persian rulers. But it's clear he had a significant effect on Persian cultural development. The dynasty that came after the Achaemenids, the Parthians, traced their lineage back to

Artaxerxes II to establish their legitimacy, suggesting Artaxerxes II is an important figure in the collective understanding of Persian identity. Part of this also comes from Artaxerxes II's immense family. Records indicate he had some 115 sons and as many as 350 wives.

However, Artaxerxes II's reign would eventually come to an end, and this would once again thrust the Persian Empire into a period of dramatic instability, but this time it would be unable to recover. His one final push would fail to reestablish Persian dominance, and the glory of the Achaemenids would be relegated to the annals of history.

His son, Artaxerxes III, took over as king, and as one might expect, his tenure as king started with the need to suppress the various satrapies and kingdoms who were contesting his claim to the throne. Asia Minor had been difficult to reliably control since Cyrus II first conquered Lydia back in the 7th century BCE, and this trend would continue even after 300 years of Persian influence in the region and repeated attempts to conquer and control it.

Attempting to avoid a long, costly, and likely unproductive campaign into Asia Minor, Artaxerxes III was looking for a different way to bring long-lasting peace to the region. He began diplomatically arranging a peace agreement with the Athenians, who were constantly meddling in Asia Minor due to the large presence of Greeks in the region. This treaty forced the Persians to recognize the independence of the Greek city-states in Asia Minor. Next, he moved to disband the armies of the various satrapies throughout Asia Minor, a play he hoped would help disarm the rebellious leaders in the region and prevent them from making any serious threat to Persian power.

But none of this worked, and Artaxerxes III was forced to revert to the tactics of his predecessors. Athens betrayed Artaxerxes III and sent forces to help the rebels win back Sardis, which they did. But then in 353 BCE, Artaxerxes III launched a full-scale campaign through Asia Minor which was successful in disbanding the rebellious armies and securing Persian control in the region.

Shortly after his success in Asia Minor, Artaxerxes III began to set his sights on Egypt, the territory his father had lost and failed to regain. But almost as soon as Artaxerxes III entered Egypt and engaged the Egyptians, rebellion broke out again in Asia Minor, which this time the Egyptians

supported. Yet Artaxerxes III continued into Egypt until he was defeated, and by the time this happened, Phoenicia, Asia Minor, and now Cyprus were in full-scale revolt. An attempt to quell the rebellion in Cyprus failed, and the Persians were soon driven out of Phoenicia, bringing the Persian Empire to its smallest area since Cyrus II and Cambyses first established Persian dominance throughout western Asia.

In 343 BCE, Artaxerxes III once again turned his attention back to Egypt, and this time he was successful in bringing the Egyptian king into submission. Afterward, he installed a reign of terror that involved the burning of religious and cultural buildings, and anyone caught practicing Egyptian religions was persecuted and often executed. The idea was to try and discourage the Egyptians from ever revolting again, and it had the additional effect of stopping other regions in the Persian Empire from revolting; victory over Egypt seemed to be enough for these rebellious groups to see that Artaxerxes III still commanded a powerful army that should not be challenged. However, Macedon, led by Phillip III of Macedon, was gaining considerable power on the other side of the Aegean Sea, and their rise meant Persia's days as western Asia's superpower were limited.

During these final stages of campaigning, Artaxerxes III appointed a man named Bagoas to be one of his highest-ranking advisers, but this move would prove to be ill-fated, as Bagoas had his own ambitions and ended up poisoning Artaxerxes III with the help of a physician. Artaxerxes III died in 338 BCE.

### *The End of The Achaemenid Dynasty*

Artaxerxes IV succeeded Artaxerxes III, but before he was able to do anything, he too was poisoned by Bagoas, who then moved to place Artaxerxes IV's nephew, Darius III, on the throne. Shortly after this happened, Darius III, aware of Bagoas' actions, forced him to take poison. Egypt, once again, revolted, and Darius III had to send troops to quell the rebellion.

But at this point, it did not really matter who was king of Persia or if the Egyptians had been subdued. Alexander III of Macedon, who is known to the rest of the world as Alexander the Great, had taken his large, battled-hardened army into Asia Minor during 334 BCE. He quickly defeated the Persian armies at Granicus in 334, Issus in 333, and Gaugamela in 331. He

then followed up these victories by attacking Susa and the Persian capital, Persepolis, both of which surrendered in 330 BCE.

Darius III had run to Ecbatana and then continued on to Bactria, where he was murdered by the Bactrian satrap, Bessus, who then declared himself Artaxerxes V, king of Persia. But this lasted for almost no time at all. Alexander and his armies marched into Bactria, found Bessus, or Artaxerxes V, and put him on trial in Persian court, where he was sentenced to be executed.

Some scholars consider Alexander the Great to be the "last of the Achaemenids," largely because he kept most of the Persian political apparatus intact after his conquest. However, he was not Persian and had no claim to the Persian throne. Yet his willingness to leave administration of the empire the way it was can in part be attributed to his relatively successful rule over western Asia.

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE, his now massive empire, which extended from Greece all the way to the Indus River, was divided among his generals with the largest territory, the one in which the Iranian plateau was located, being given to Seleucus I Nicator, who would govern over the territory once known as the Persian Empire but that was now understood as the Seleucid Empire.

***Conclusion***

As is the case with most ancient empires, the demise of the Persian Empire under the Achaemenid Dynasty seems to have occurred quickly. However, when looking more closely at the events that led up to its downfall, it's easy to see how precarious Persia's grip on power really was, and it's also easy to see how the complex geopolitical situation of Mesopotamia and abroad made it difficult to maintain an empire of that size for too long.

But this is not meant to discount the accomplishments of the Achaemenid Dynasty. In a matter of just 300 years, it went from being the leader of an obscure Persian tribe on the Iranian plateau to being one of the largest and most formidable empires in the history of the ancient world.

However, the region Persia controlled was simply too large, too diverse, and subjected to too many influences for them to hope to hold onto power forever. So even though the Persian military at the time was one of the strongest seen to date, the competing political powers within the state, combined with the frequent revolts from conquered territories and overly

ambitious attempts at expansion into Europe started by Darius I and continued by Xerxes, all contributed to the eventual downfall of the Persian Empire under the Achaemenid Dynasty. But this would not be the end of Persian history. Within a few hundred years of Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia, a new dynasty, which would trace its roots back to the Achaemenids but that would be known as the Parthians, would merge and restore Iranians to power in Persia and across western Asia.

# Chapter 5 – Life in Ancient Persia

Almost as soon as Persia became an empire under the Achaemenid Dynasty, it also became a large, diverse nation. Its borders stretched from Egypt to Turkey, parts of Greece, Armenia, Iraq, Iran, Arabia, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and even into India, and nearly all the lands in between, which included powerful and influential cultures such as the Phoenicians, the Jews, the Medes, the Babylonians, and many more. As a result, it's impossible to describe Persia as a unified society with its own distinct cultural norms.

Instead, it's better to think of it as a loose coalition of different cultures, many of which were brought together by force, but that remained connected through Persia's highly-developed, centralized form of political organization that was set up by Darius I (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, we can still paint a picture of what life might have been like for the people living in the Persian Empire.

The Persians themselves, who resided in Persis, which is in the modern country of Iran, would have been at the center of the empire. However, due to its lack of arable land and harsh terrain, Persia itself was far from the most developed part of the empire. In fact, before the Persian tribes were unified under Cyrus II, Iran was barely settled. It was instead inhabited mostly by nomadic tribes, which would have put the Persians far behind their neighbors in Mesopotamia in terms of urban development and social advancement.

Because of Iran's difficult topography, good, fertile land was scarce, which led to the development of a landowning class that would serve as the nobility during the Persian Empire. Before the birth of the empire and during its existence, Persia would have been a feudal society, meaning peasants would have been expected to pay rent to a landowner in exchange for the right to work the land, and some of the fruits of their labor would have been paid back to the landowner as a tax.

However, as the empire grew and expanded, the Persian people living in Persia would have likely experienced a dramatic improvement in their quality of life. First, the completion of the Royal Road by Darius I connected Sardis in Asia Minor with Susa and Ecbatana, as well as other cities throughout Media and Bactria. This would have brought new goods

from afar into Persia, and it would have made it easier for them to trade with other parts of the empire. Furthermore, Persia itself was exempt from paying imperial taxes and tributes, which would have significantly reduced the imperial burden on the Persian people.

Another thing that would have contributed to the Persian people's relatively high standard of living would have been the exit of the landowning class. Once Cyrus II conquered Babylon and it was fortified by Darius I, much of the landowning class would have moved out of Persia into Babylon and Mesopotamia. Farmland was far better and more bountiful in the Fertile Crescent, meaning it would have been easier for them to increase their wealth. The feudal system remained, but it's likely its burden was not as heavy as compared to what would have happened had the Persian elite elected to stay in the Iranian plateau.

Life in Persia also would have been relatively peaceful. War did not reach the homeland until Alexander the Great began conquering western Asia. But this does not mean the Persian people were unfamiliar with war. Military service was required, and many men would spend much of their lives away from home fighting in the different theaters around the empire. However, Persian use of mercenaries, conscripts, and slaves in their armies would have reduced the need for Persian soldiers, although most Persian kings considered their kinsman to be naturally better fighters. A more detailed description of the Persian military is given in Chapter 6.

Like all pre-modern societies, Persia was a largely agrarian culture. Inside Persia itself, livestock would have been the primary produce, largely because scarce arable land made it hard to produce a surplus of agricultural goods. However, through trade with the provinces throughout the empire, Persians would have had access to many of the goods enjoyed in Mesopotamia and abroad, including wheat and barley. It's difficult to ascertain exactly how well people lived, largely because of a lack of records. But it's reasonable to believe the peasantry lived in what would today be considered rural poverty. Yet the absence of military conquest and the availability of goods through trade would have brought significant improvements to the peasantry's quality of life.

Elsewhere in the empire, the presence of the Persian Empire would have brought considerable prosperity for several reasons. First, the construction of the Royal Road made it much easier for merchants to travel across western Asia and trade with one another. Also, the centralized bureaucracy

of the Persian Empire made it easy for people from different cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds to engage with each other economically

Another thing that contributed to the economic prosperity of the Persian Empire was the introduction of currency. Cyrus II first introduced gold coins to the empire, but it was Darius I who would expand upon the practice by standardizing a gold coin. It weighed 8.4 kilograms, and it was the equivalent of 20 silver coins. Currency was already in use in some form or another throughout the empire, particularly in the Greek city-states that were located in Asia Minor, but this standardization would have made it much easier for different parts of the empire to trade with one another. However, the Persian monarchs, especially starting with Xerxes, had a propensity to hoard gold and silver. This would have slowed the circulation of coinage around the empire, which would have reduced the importance of currency. But even so, this development was rather significant to the economic development of the region.

The last major reason the Persian Empire would have helped usher in a period of relative economic stability and prosperity was Darius I's policy of tolerance and acceptance. Because he did not attempt to persecute people based on their religion and culture, most people would have lived in relative peace throughout the time of Persian dominance. Of course, rebellions and insurrections were common throughout the empire, and war was constant. But this would have been limited to the regions on the periphery. The rest of the empire would have enjoyed considerable stability that allowed for a growth in wealth.

The Persians also helped usher in the adoption of Aramaic as the lingua franca of the empire. Although one would have encountered a different language in almost every corner of the empire, the establishment of Aramaic, which was a Semitic language used mostly in cities of modern Syria, as the official language of the empire gave the region a *lingu franca* to use in law and business. Part of the reason this language was chosen was because it was highly standardized and uniform, meaning it was easier to learn than other languages in the region. Some scholars have called Aramaic the Persian Empire's official language, but this is incorrect, as it would have likely only been spoken outside its traditional regions to conduct business, legal, and government affairs. Nonetheless, the use of a common language would have made it far easier for the many different

peoples of the Persian Empire to communicate and interact with one another, something that helped to strengthen Persian imperial power.

Overall, life in the Persian Empire would not have been all that different than life in many of the other ancient civilizations of this part of the world. Daily life would have consisted of farming, praying to the gods, military training and service, or engaging in whichever trade or craft you had been trained to perform. The major changes that took place would have been in the political and bureaucratic arrangements of the empire. But some of these changes would have helped usher in a higher quality of life and increased connectivity between many different cultures. However, these improvements and advancements would come as a result of the Persian monarchy's conquests and expansion, meaning war would have been a central part of life for most of the people living during the time of the Persian Empire.

# Chapter 6 – The Persian Military

Seizing and holding onto power in the ancient world could not be done without a large, strong, and effective military. The Assyrians, who preceded the Persians as western Asia's hegemon, had developed a military machine that would strike fear in the hearts of nearly all its neighbors, moving many kingdoms to submit merely out of fear of what could happen to them should they be subjected to an Assyrian invasion.

The Persians were no different. While the Assyrians might go down in history as one of the most ruthless military cultures to have ever walked the Earth, the Persians were able to create and sustain a large military that would be the source of their power throughout the entire duration of the Achaemenid Dynasty. The core of the Persian army was made up of Persians themselves, but the Achaemenids also made use of many other groups of people to help them sustain their large armies and maintain control over their empire.

### *The Persian Immortals*

This particular rank of Persian soldiers was considered to be one of the most powerful forces in all of western Asia and abroad, and they have gone down in history as one of the world's most famous military units. They were deemed "immortal" because by law the size of the force was never allowed to drop below 10,000. This meant that, in theory, as soon as a Persian soldier died, he would immediately be replaced by another, preventing any enemy from doing real damage to the Persian military.

To fill these ranks, the Persian monarchs drew from their own people; Persians were not required to pay taxes and tribute to the crown, but they were expected to lay down their lives and fight for their king no questions asked. However, it was also common to find Medes and Elamites among the ranks of the Immortals, as these three civilizations were closely aligned both culturally and politically. Once selected, they would be sent to Susa to train and then join the ranks of the Immortals wherever they were in the empire at the time. This created a situation where the Persian army had a constant flow of reinforcements, helping to make it more effective and better able to wage long military campaigns against foreign enemies.

Persian Immortals were given special treatment. They were dressed well, and their uniforms often featured highly-decorative gold ornaments. And

when these soldiers traveled, they were permitted to take servants and concubines with them, and they were often served special food on camels or other baggage animals. To add to their grandeur and also to try and intimidate enemy forces, Persian Immortals were all dressed the same. Their heads were shaved, and their short beards were curled. Golf bracelets drooped over their arms, and their spears were made with silver blades that would have helped prove they were indeed a member of the 10,000 Immortals. They would have also had a bow and a quiver thrown over their shoulder, but an Immortal would not have been permitted to carry any other weapon besides the spear and bow.

***Satrapal Armies***

While the Immortals would have represented the highest ranks of the Persian military, 10,000 men would not have been nearly enough to secure the empire and tend to its many foes both near and far—remember Xerxes invaded Greece with a force of over 150,000 men and the naval fleets of three very powerful kingdoms.

In an attempt to maintain control over the different regions of the empire, the Persian kings required each satrap to contribute a certain number of troops. The king would appoint a military commander to direct the satrapal armies, and then each regional leader would be responsible for meeting the quotas mandated by the king and his commanders, a number that would depend heavily on the campaign being conducted and the types of soldiers a satrap could offer. For example, the Egyptians and Phoenicians were relied upon heavily for their navies, whereas the Persians drew from their Median, Bactrian, and Indian provinces for ground soldiers.

Unlike the Immortals, there would have been little to no uniformity in terms of what the satrapal armies would have worn. Each group would have adorned whatever clothing was the norm for soldiers from their region, and this oftentimes made it difficult for enemies to know they were even fighting Persians. Furthermore, this forced conscription of satrapal populations meant that although the Persian army was large, it was made up mostly of people who had been forced into service. As a result, depending on the political situation of the time, the effectiveness of these forces would vary. For example, the Egyptians and Phoenicians were committed to helping Xerxes with his invasion of Greece until he decided to ruthlessly execute Phoenician commanders. They responded by leaving Greece and

deserting Xerxes in the middle of his campaign to invade Europe, something that significantly hurt his chances at victory.

Dependence on these satrapal armies set up an interesting conundrum that is commonly seen in civilizations across the ancient world. On the one hand, Persia needed to conquer and expand its territorial control so as to be able to recruit an army large enough to maintain its control over conquered territories. It should come as no surprise then that many of the satrapies, especially those located on the periphery of the empire, were subjected to constant warfare. On the other hand, other kings in the region, attempting to regain autonomy after being conquered, would have competed for the loyalties of these same people, for this is how they would stock their armies and succeed as king. This meant that people were constantly changing allegiances and that it would have been difficult to rely solely on the satrapies for filling the ranks of the Persian armies. .

***Mercenaries and Other Armies***

In addition to the Immortals and satrapal armies, the Persians also relied heavily on mercenaries, especially for their naval units. They also made widespread use of slave armies, taking people from conquered lands and forcing them into military service. Their military units were formed based on need and also the relationship a satrap had with the king. Military units might be granted some degree of autonomy, or they might be absorbed into the larger Persian army. For example, after one of the initial Babylonian revolts, the region was annexed and added to the satrap of Assyria. From that moment on, no mention of Babylonian troops exists. They likely would not have been trusted enough to operate on their own, and their status would have been relegated to that of a slave.

Persian military might was one of the main reasons why it was able to gain such considerable territory and power over such a short period of time. The initial successes of Cyrus II gave future kings the notion that Persian soldiers were stronger and more capable than any other group within the empire. This gave way to the formation of the Persian Immortals, which would be the most terrifying and effective military force during the time period when the Persians controlled all the lands from Egypt to India.

# Chapter 7 – Zoroastrianism: Persia's Religion

Similar to other ancient civilizations, religion played an important role in both the lives of commoners as well as leaders in the Persian Empire. But unlike the previous empires of western Asia, namely Sumeria, Assyria, and Babylon, the Persians were monotheistic. They practiced a religion known as Zoroastrianism, which is named after its chief prophet, Zoroaster, sometimes known as Zarathustra. Its origins trace back to the second millennium BCE, which makes it one of the oldest monotheistic religions in human history. It is still practiced today, but starting with the Arab invasion of Persia in the 7th century CE, Islam began to spread across the Iranian plateau. Later on, the Iranian Revolution, which took place in the 20th century, put Zoroastrianism further into the background of Persian/Iranian culture, but it remains prominent and is even seeing a revival as modern Iranians seek to push back from the Islamic theocracy that dominates their country's politics.

### *The Founding of Zoroastrianism*

The first mention of Zoroastrianism as an organized religion appear in the 5th century when the Greek historian Herodotus, often called the father of history, wrote *The Histories*, which is a detailed account of the many different cultures and civilizations that existed and interacted with one another across western Asia and southern Europe.

However, many historians believe the core beliefs and practices of Zoroastrianism can trace their roots back to Indo-Iranian customs that became popular starting c. 2500 BCE. Yet it's likely that somewhere in between is when it took shape as the religion that would eventually become a defining characteristic of Persian culture. It's believed that Zoroaster, who is considered a prophet in the religion but who was most likely a religious reformer, began spreading his version of the faith in the 10th century BCE.

Little by little, the teachings of Zoroaster penetrated the collective psyche of the Persian people, and they even had an influence in the development of other religious traditions, such as Zurvanism, the main religion of the Magi, a tribe which held considerable influence at the Median courts. It's believed that the initial spread of Zoroastrianism was actually meant to help limit the power of this particular group after Cyrus the Great was able to bring the

Persian and Median kingdoms together, laying the foundation for what would become the great Persian Empire.

But it would not be accurate to say that Cyrus II and his immediate successors, such as Cambyses and Darius I, were Zoroastrians themselves. At the time, many Persians believed in the Zoroastrian deity, Ahura Mazda, but this did not mean they were followers of Zoroaster and his teachings. But as the Persian Empire expanded, so would the influence of Zoroastrianism on its people, resulting in it eventually becoming the main religion of Persia under Artaxerxes II.

***Zoroastrian Beliefs***

First and foremost, Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion, meaning it believes in only one god, Ahura Mazda, which translates from Old Iranian and Persian into Wise Lord. Ahura literally means "being," whereas Mazda means "mind." Zoroaster taught this distinction so as to highlight the concept of duality, and he also made sure to refer to one as masculine and one as feminine, likely an attempt to not depict Ahura Mazda as a human. Furthermore, Zoroaster taught that Ahura Mazda was almighty, but not omnipotent, an important distinction and one that not many religions of the time made, especially those based in polytheism.

One of the defining characteristics of Zoroastrianism is the significance it places on duality. Specifically, it depicts the world as being locked in a struggle between good and evil, and that the end of times will coincide with a final triumph of good. Ahura Mazda manifests through the Spenta Mainyu, which are divine entities. The term literally translates to divine holys. Through these entities, Ahura Mazda serves as a benevolent "father" responsible for overcoming the influence of Druj, which means falsehood or deceit. There is no evil in Ahura Mazda, and his primary responsibility to humanity is to help it overcome the forces of evil trying to push it toward destruction.

The pillars of Zoroastrianism are: 1) Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta, which translate to Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds; 2) There is only one path, the path of Truth; and 3) Do the right thing because it's right, and then you will see rewards later.

This belief in an almighty deity fighting to spread good and defeat evil represents a significant development as compared to early Iranian religions, which trace back to Aryan customs that defined no good or deity, and

instead thought the world was governed by different evil spirits and demons. Another interesting aspect of Zoroastrianism is that it asks its followers to protect nature, specifically outlining the need to maintain earth, air, wind, and water, which has led many theologians to declare Zoroastrianism the world's first ecological religion, although this title has been contested by some.

However, no matter which way one looks at it, Zoroastrianism was a peaceful religion. Unlike the religions of other ancient civilizations, such as Assyria or Babylon, it did not preach warfare as a necessary means for existence and survival. This belief could help explain why Persian kings were rarely if ever interested in changing the religious customs practiced by those they conquered; persecution typically only took place when it was politically necessary.

Furthermore, some of the principal ideas in Zoroastrian teachings, such as the idea of a messiah, judgment after death, the idea of heaven and hell, and free will, helped to shape other religious traditions, most notably Second Temple Judaism, Gnosticism, Christianity, and Islam. Zoroastrianism remained the principal religion of the Persian people until the Arabs invaded in the 7$^{th}$ century CE. From that point on, Islam was the primary religion of the region, and beyond this point in history, Zoroastrianism was often persecuted.

Today, there are estimated to be some 200,000 practices of Zoroastrianism scattered throughout Iran and India. And while its significance diminished significantly after the Arab invasion of Persia, it had a significant effect on the cultural development of Persia and of western Asia as a whole.

# Chapter 8 – Later Persian Dynasties: The Parthian Empire to the Qajar Dynasty

After the fall of Susa and Persepolis to Alexander the Great in 330 BCE, the Achaemenid Dynasty fell. The Persian Empire was now a part of Alexander's vast dominion, and when he died, it was left in the hands of one of his generals, Seluceus I Nicator, who formed the Seleucid Empire, which consisted of the territories on the Iranian plateau and into Media and parts of Mesopotamia, although it would never reach even a semblance of the size and glory of Persia under the Achaemenids. The Persians were denied the ability to govern their own homeland for just a little over 100 years after being conquered by Alexander.

However, just because the Achaemenids fell from power, this did not signal the end of the Persians. In fact, using a broad lens of history, it was really just the beginning. Different Persian dynasties would emerge after the fall of the Seleucid Empire, and this would help carry the Persian Empire well into the modern era. It fell once again in the 19th century under the Qajar Dynasty, and this paved the way for the formation of the country of Iran.

These different dynasties that came after the Achaemenids experienced varying levels of success. For example, the Sassanian Empire, which was formed in 224 CE, lasted more than 400 years, whereas the Afsharid Dynasty, formed in 1501 CE, was on this earth for just 60 years, existing only long enough for there to be just a few kings.

Each one of these dynasties should really be studied on their own. Like the Achaemenids, they each have a rich history of conquest and consolidation, and each one made their own specific contributions to both Persian history and culture. However, looking at the major accomplishments of each one offers some perspective on how Persia has shaped the course of world history, and how it has contributed to the forming of the world in which we now live.

### *The Parthian Empire (247 BCE-224 CE)*

The Seleucid Empire would last no more than 100 years before the Persians, starting with the Parthian Dynasty and ending with the Sassanian Dynasty, were able to retake control of their homeland, and once they did, they would succeed in holding onto it for the next 600 years.

This successor to the Achaemenids is referred to as the Parthian Empire largely because of how it came into existence. King Arsaces I of Parthia, who lead the local Parni tribe, rose up and seized the region of Parthia, which is in northeastern Iran, sometime in the mid-3rd century BCE. Later on, Parthian historians would write 247 BCE as the exact year the Parthian Empire was founded, although it's uncertain why this date was chosen as historical records do not produce evidence of any significant events during this year that could be associated with the formation of the empire. This could be because at the time Parthia was in open rebellion to Seleucid rule. It's likely Arsaces I's seizure of the territory was contested and he needed to spend a great deal of time securing the land he had just won back from the empire's central authorities.

Arsaces I's success, though, stopped there. He spent most of his reign defending himself from the region's previous imperial rulers as they attempted to take back the territory they had lost. However, they were unsuccessful, and the Parthian-led Persians were able to maintain their independence despite repeated advances from the Seleucids. It wasn't until Mithridates I came to power in c. 171 BCE that the Parthians would begin to chip away at the Seleucid Empire and establish themselves as a power in the region, once again making Persia an important political player in western Asia.

Mithridates I managed to conquer Media and Mesopotamia, which would have reduced the Seleucid Empire to not much more than the territory in what we would today call southern Iran. This all but obliterated the Seleucid Empire from history, and it once again brought Iranians to power in the Iranian plateau, which would last until the Arabs invaded in the 7th century, still some 700 years away.

However, while the Parthian Empire was able to annex a relatively large territory in western Asia, it would never match what the Achaemenids did in terms of the amount of territory they controlled and their influence over it. For example, while the Achaemenids installed a highly-centralized system of government that depended on king-appointed satraps, the Parthians relied much more heavily on local leadership. Instead of conquering, they would attempt to negotiate tribute relationships from surrounding kings, making them their vassals and easing the burden of governance that often comes with having a large empire.

The other factor limiting the expansion of the Parthians was the competition they faced for control of western Asia. Far to the west, the Roman Republic had become quite powerful and had begun to try to expand its influence in and around Iran. And in the Far East, the Chinese under the Han Dynasty were moving westward to try and expand their influence and establish trade relations. The Parthians would never engage directly with the Chinese, largely because the eastern provinces were well defended by the kings in that area, but they would actively compete with the Romans. For example, both empires wanted to make the king of Armenia their vassal, and this led to some tense moments between the once-great Persians and the rising Romans. The Romans and Parthians also fought directly in different parts of west Asia as the Romans continued to flex their imperial muscles around the world.

But perhaps the most significant accomplishment of the Parthian Empire were the trade relations it was able to establish. Most importantly, it helped connect the Chinese Silk Road to western Asia, which made it much easier for Chinese goods to be imported into Europe. For example, the Romans bought considerable amounts of silk—its largest import—as well as pearls and other luxury goods. In return, the Chinese bought dyes and spices as well as other Middle Eastern foods. Because Persia lies strategically in the middle of these two influential regions of the world, they were able to impose duties on trade between Rome and China, enriching the empire and helping it establish itself as a significant player in western Asian politics, as well as the development of world history.

Given the time period in which the Parthian Empire existed, it shouldn't be surprising that its downfall was a direct result of the expansion of the Roman Empire. Peace treaties were frequently made and then broken, and the Persians were able to maintain autonomy largely because the Romans were hesitant to extend themselves too far to the east and deplete their military resources. However, the Romans did not capture the Parthian kings. Instead, they made slow advances into Mesopotamia, ensuring the border was fortified before continuing. For most of the time the two kingdoms coexisted, the border between the two was typically somewhere around the Tigris River.

One attempt at invasion was made by the Roman emperor Trajan (c. 100 CE), who succeeded in capturing the Persian city of Susa, one of the most important Persian cities under the Achaemenids. But this conquest did not

last long as the Babylonians revolted and pushed the Romans back further west into Mesopotamia. The Romans would never again try to expand that far east, but the results of this invasion would shake the Parthian Empire at its core and trigger its fall from power.

Internal strife between the various rulers with Persia significantly weakened the Parthian grip on power, and the near-constant war with Rome also put considerable strain on their military, leaving the Parthians open to attack, which came in 224 CE when Ardashir I of Persis (which would have been the center of the Achaemenid Dynasty but that had been reduced to a province under the Parthians. It was not a capital though; the Parthians set their capitals in northeastern Iran) revolted against the Parthian Dynasty and began subjugating territories. He eventually engaged with the Parthians at the Battle of Hormozdgan in 224 CE, which Ardashir I won. This brought an end to the Parthian Empire and gave birth to the next age of Persia: the Sassanian Empire.

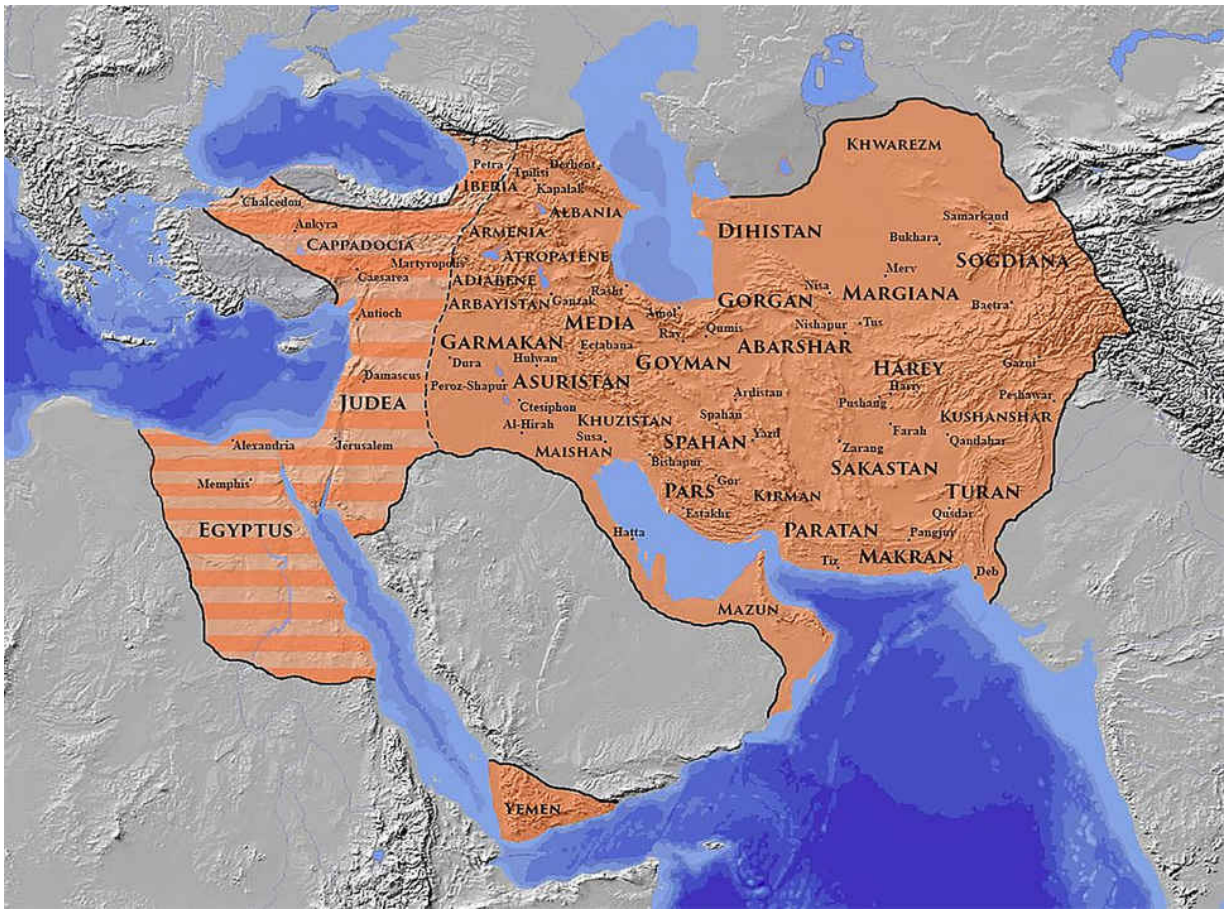
In comparison to the Achaemenid dynasty and empire, the Parthians were much smaller and much less powerful. This is in part because of the constant competition they faced from their powerful neighbors, such as Rome. However, after the fall of the Parthian Empire, the Sassanian Empire was born, and it would last for some 400 years. It would significantly expand on the territory controlled by Persia, and it would be the last Persian Empire before the rise of Islam.

The ascension of Ardashir I was not uncontested. Rebellion broke out across the empire, and the Romans intensified their hostilities once they saw the internal struggles of the Parthians, hoping to capitalize on this to help bring the Parthians fully under Roman control. However, Ardashir I, as well as his son, Shapur I, managed to successfully campaign around the empire to put these rebellions down, and they also managed to defeat the Romans to the west, pushing the conflict back toward the Mediterranean and the Caucuses.

Rebellions continued, but by c. 300 CE, the Sassanians were firmly entrenched as the new Persian monarchs. The split of the Roman Empire meant their new opponent would be the Eastern Roman Empire, also known as the Byzantine Empire. The Sassanian Empire was constantly warring with this powerful western neighbor, and it even laid siege to Constantinople. But neither side was ever able to conquer the other, and in

the end, the resource drain and political strife caused by war would prove to be the Sassanians' downfall.

However, although the Sassanian Empire was not as territorially large as the Achaemenid Empire (see Figure 13), it in many ways restored the glory of the Persian Empire and also helped establish the Persians as one of the more powerful forces in the region.




Persian culture flourished under the Sassanians, who made many contributions to the development of the region. Most specifically, the Sassanians were well known for their art, and paintings, sculptures, and decorative textiles were commissioned and traded all over the empire. Many scholars consider Sassanian art to be the predecessor to Muslim art, which would become one of the most well-known styles in all the world as Islam grew in prominence throughout the 1st millennia CE.

Part of the success of Persia under the Sassanians was that the Sassanian kings returned to the form of centralized government implemented by the Achaemenids. Unlike the Parthians, who elected instead to rely on local kings and rulers to help them enforce their rule, the Sassanians used satraps

and appointed provincial governors directly, using the intricate roads system built throughout Mesopotamia and central Asia to move troops and give orders about how to best manage the empire. This helped the Sassanians become far more powerful and therefore far more influential than the Parthians.

A short description of the accomplishments of the Sassanian Empire does not do justice to its significance. But what is important to remember is that the formation of the Parthian Dynasty and then the Sassanian Dynasty is a big reason why Persian culture is still around and prominent today. Many ancient civilizations came and went, Assyria and Babylon, for example, often being absorbed by much larger powers. The Achaemenids put Persia on the map, but the almost 1,000 years of Parthian and Sassanian rule helped entrench the Persians as key contributors to the development of world culture.

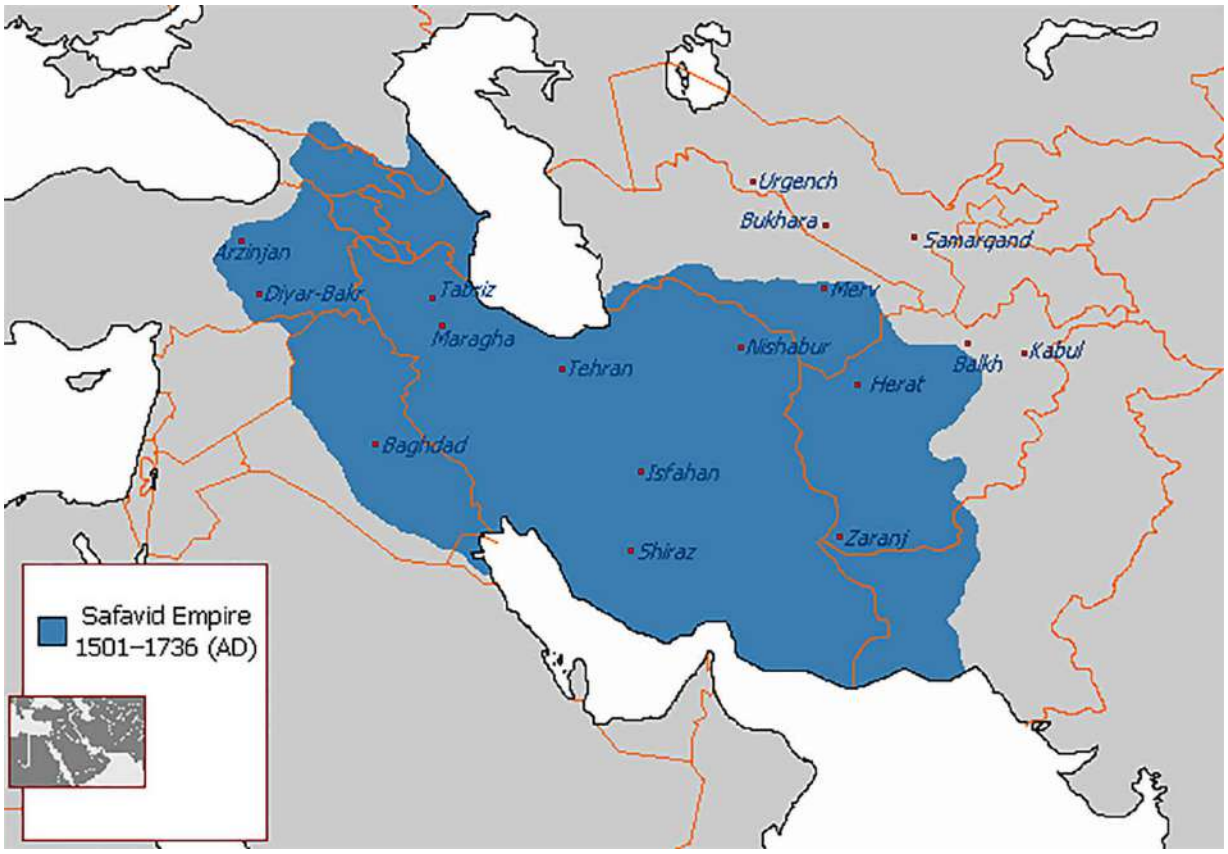
And if we stop to consider that the next 900 years would see no Persian rule —the Arabs invaded and included Persia in its caliphate—the cultural achievements of the early Persian Empires can be considered even more remarkable. They had managed to become so influential in the region that even though their cultural norms were repressed—Zoroastrianism declined significantly under the Arabs—they are able to remain relevant even to this day, which is just further proof that the Persian Empire and people are some of the most important to the formation of our modern world.

***The Safavid Dynasty (1501-1736 CE)***

In a short period of just five years in the middle of the 7th century, the Sassanian Empire fell. Muslim armies invaded, and capitalizing on the already existing decline of the empire, were able to bring it down in c. 651. This marked the beginning of a dramatic transformation in Persian history and culture. Zoroastrianism began to decline, and Islam became the dominant religion of the time. But much like Roman/Latin culture did not disappear after the fall of Rome, Persian culture had developed to the point where it could continue growing despite the fact that Persians could not claim themselves as part of an independent nation. Still, this period of time would have a dramatic influence on Persian/Iranian history, and it would also have a large impact on the shaping of the modern world.

However, the Persians were far from gone. It took nearly 900 years, but by 1501 CE, Persia had managed to gain its independence, and the Safavid

Dynasty rose to power, a group of rulers who would play a significant role in the formation of today's Iran, both in terms of territory as well as culture. In 1501, political unrest in the region left Persia essentially without a ruler, and Shah Ismail I, whose background is disputed although he and his descendants would claim they shared lineage with the prophet Mohammad, rose to power and established the Safavid Dynasty. Little by little he was able to win over the various cities on the Iranian plateau, ending his conquest by driving the Uzbeks out of Iranian territory and also fortifying the border with the Ottoman Empire, which was western Asia's greatest power at the time. Figure 14 shows the extent of the Persian Empire under the Safavids, and it also shows the modern borders of the various countries in the region. The Safavids controlled more territory than what is considered Iran today, but the Safavid Dynasty's ability to secure these borders is partly the reason why it is considered the founder of modern Iran.




The defining characteristic of the Safavid Dynasty was the shah (king) and his power. Along with the Mughal Empire in India and the Ottoman Empire in Turkey, the Safavid Empire is one of the Gunpowder Empires, a term used to describe civilizations that were able to establish strong, militaristic

states by monopolizing the use of gunpowder weapons, specifically artillery and muskets.

And while the shah ruled with absolute supremacy, there is still evidence of some democratic principles and institutions. For example, the Persian bureaucracy was large and advanced, and Persian government officials were trained to record nearly all the actions of their departments. Both of these tactics had the *de facto* effect of limiting the power of the shah, although he had complete control over the military. This concept of highly-centralized yet efficient and effective bureaucracy was a defining characteristic of Persian culture, and it traced its roots all the way back to the policies of Darius I, the third emperor of the Achaemenid Dynasty.

This strong military rule is in part the reason we have a country of Iran today. It allowed the Persians to reassert themselves as an integral part of the overland trade routes between the European powers and Eastern empires, mainly those located in China and India. By being able to secure its borders and also effectively ward off attacks by nomadic tribes and other imperial hopefuls, the shahs of the Safavid Dynasty managed to establish Persia as a powerful force in the region, something that would continue until this very day.

But perhaps the most significant contribution to Persian/Iranian culture made by the Safavids was the adoption and spread of the Shi'a branch of Islam. However, this was done in less than ethical ways. When Shah Ismail I came to power in the early 1500s, he turned his back on an old tradition of religious tolerance by the Persian kings and made Shi'a Islam the official religion of the empire, making conversion mandatory. The Sunni population, which was rather large in Persia at the time, that did not convert was either exiled or killed, and the Sunni Ulema, the priesthood, was heavily persecuted. This decision would turn out to have a dramatic effect on the course of world history. The Sunni-Shi'a conflict is one of the modern world's most significant, and it has its roots in the Safavid decision to make Shi'a Islam its official religion and scorn believers of all other faiths.

The decline of the Safavid Dynasty falls into line with the broader historical trend of European influence in other parts of the world. While wars with neighboring states depleted the resources of the Safavid Dynasty and weakened its grip on power, it was the entrance of the Dutch East India

Company, as well as the British navy, that would have a significant role in bringing about the decline of the Persian Empire under the Safavids.

This entrance of the Dutch East India Company gave Europeans a monopoly over trade in the region, and they blocked non-sanctioned overseas trade routes between Iran and the rest of Asia, which slowly depleted the Persian/Iranian government of many of its resources. As a result, the Safavid Dynasty collapsed on itself, and by the early 1700s, it was under heavy attack. Different tribal and ethnic groups wreaked havoc on its borders, and the Russians and Ottomans took this moment of weakness as their opportunity to seize control of Persia, which they did. By 1724, the Safavid Dynasty was no more, and Persia was divided between the Russians and the Ottomans, bringing an end to Persian independence for the time.

***The Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925)***

Attempts in the mid-18th century to reestablish Persian independence failed, and it wasn't until the end of the century, with the rise of the Qajar Dynasty, that Persia would once again be able to flex its muscles as a free and independent nation. This is considered to be the last dynasty of Persia. Its fall coincided with the outbreak of World War II, and pressures from other countries as well as its own people forced it to accept a constitutional monarchy for the last 20 years of its rule. Shahs would continue to rule Iran until the Iranian Revolution in 1977, and the Qajar family still exists today, although it has no claim to rule in Iran.

The Qajar Dynasty sprung into resistance under Shah Mohammad Khan Qajar, which ended the brief Afsharid Dynasty (the aforementioned attempt to establish a Persian monarch after the fall of the Safavids). And as soon as he secured control over Iran, he immediately set his sights on the Caucuses, hoping to regain territories lost over the previous few centuries. Initial successes were followed by crushing defeats as the Russians moved against the Qajars and were able to take the territories making up modern-day Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

These defeats led to the drawing of the Iranian borders we know today. And the Qajar Dynasty is considered responsible for the "modernization" of Iran. They built Iran's, and the Middle East's, first university, the Dar ul-Funun in Tehran in 1851. Furthermore, the Qajars ushered in Western technologies that led to the country's industrialization, and in the 20th

century, they began trading fossil fuels to the rest of the world; to this day, Iran is a member of OPEC (Organization of the Oil Producing Countries), and it has the world's largest supply of natural gas.

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of the Qajar Dynasty was its submission to foreign powers. The British were becoming increasingly involved in the affairs of the Middle East, and various arrangements made by Qajar kings with British trading companies resulted in the majority of Iranian trade being handled by the British themselves. These developments led the Iranian people to feel as though their leaders were bound to foreign powers, and this was one of the driving forces behind the push for reform that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century.

It was this reform that would bring more democracy to the region than it had ever seen before. The country was in financial ruin, and the clergy and merchant classes demanded the shah cede powers so that others could manage the affairs of the country and put it in a better position for success. Protests broke out across Iran at the beginning of 1906, and by the end of the year, a constitution had been drawn up and ratified that established a parliament, limited royal power, and required the shah to get confirmation from the parliament for cabinet appointments.

This move appeared to start a process of democratic transition, but democracy in Iran has and still is rather difficult. To this day, most scholars and international relations experts agree that democratic principles are not honored in Iran, and that individual freedoms, especially those of women and children, are significantly limited as compared to the more liberal countries of the West.

This can be understood more easily when taking a broader look at the development of Iran as a nation. Landholder classes, powerful regional governments, and an absolute monarch have been integral parts of Iranian/Persian culture since halfway through the 1st millennium BCE. And given the course of history under the Qajars—mainly the intrusion of foreign powers into Iranian affairs—it's also not a surprise that the rise of democracy in Iran also coincided with a rise in anti-Western sentiment, which led 20th-century superpowers Britain and the United States to support autocratic Iranian governments instead of a true government by the people.

Additionally, the Qajars presided over Iran during World War I, and although they were officially neutral, they were invaded by the Ottomans

shortly after fighting broke out. However, their response was largely defensive, and Iran was able to avoid occupation by their long-time rivals. The Russians would also play a significant role in limiting the Qajar Dynasty's power. Not only did they force them out of the Caucuses, but they also managed to keep Iran from advancing elsewhere to the north or east.

Overall, the Qajar Dynasty, although much less powerful than those that came before it, played a significant role in the development of modern Iran. It helped usher in new eras of more democratic rule, industrialization, and scientific achievement spurred by an investment in public and higher education. Its eventual downfall can be understood as part of a broader trend in which medieval monarchies were replaced by more modern forms of government, but with the Qajar family still alive today, the possibility still exists that the Persian monarchs could once again rise to power and glory.

***Conclusion***

This brief discussion of the various dynasties that existed after the Achaemenids does not do justice to the glory and splendor Persia has experienced over the past 2,000 years. However, it should help show how this once great empire still lives on today. The forms of government developed by Darius I helped Persian kings control the territory we now call Iran for the better part of 2,500 years.

But perhaps more importantly, the success of these dynasties helped maintain Persian culture and establish a sense of Persian identity, something that is still alive and well today. And the overall policies of religious tolerance and regional autonomy have helped establish Iran as a dynamic, multicultural country that is one of the most powerful and significant in not only the surrounding regions but also in the world.

# Chapter 9 – Persian Art: Mixing East and West

The emergence of the Persians at the middle of the last millennium BCE makes them relative newcomers to the western Asian stage. However, once they arrived, they quickly became one of the most formidable powers in the world. While continuous rule of their homeland, the Iranian plateau, escaped them—conquest by the Greeks under Alexander and later the Muslims of Arabia interrupted long periods of Persian rule—the dominance of their empires under the Achaemenid and the Sassanian Dynasties helped establish a strong Persian culture that would persist no matter who controlled Iran.

Because of their ability to remain a strong power throughout much of antiquity and the medieval period, the Persians were able to develop a strong artistic culture that would profoundly influence that of other civilizations.

However, distinguishing which contributions are specifically Persian can sometimes be a tall task. When the Persians arrived on the scene, Mesopotamia had been inhabited for thousands of years, and the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians had all managed to build large empires that heavily influenced the development of the region. Then, in the 7th century CE, the Persians were conquered by Muslims, pushing their native religion, Zoroastrianism, out of favor, and ushering in the Golden Age of Islam. During this time, the Persians made significant contributions to Muslim art, and Persia itself was considered a hotspot for Muslim cultural development.

As a result, it's best to understand Persian cultural contributions less as true innovations and more as innovative additions. They built on previous cultures and traditions that came from their neighbors, such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Medes, but also from those territories that were on the outskirts or even beyond the borders of Persian-controlled lands, such as Greece, Rome, Russia, India, and to a lesser extent, China. However, despite this amalgamation, Persia was able to make its own mark and what came out of the Iranian plateau would help push world culture forward and contributed significantly to its advancement.

### *Architecture*

Much like their contemporaries, Persian kings were obsessed with building. With conquest came great riches, and nearly all the Persian monarchs were

concerned with using these riches to help build palaces and other residences that would demonstrate their success as a conqueror and also help them legitimize their claim to the throne.

As a result, much of the artistic achievements of the Persian Empire are found in and around palaces and other royal installations. Art would not have been a more widespread occupation likely until after the Islamic period began in Persia, so skilled artisans would have congregated in the Persian capitals, starting first with Persepolis and then moving toward Susa and Ctesiphon (the capital of the Sassanian Dynasty, which is in present-day Iraq).

The most significant contributions the Persians made in terms of building was their continued development of columns. This is a perfect example of the Persians taking a previously existing form of art or architecture and building upon it to make it their own. And the remaining evidence of this exists in Persepolis, one of the main capitals of the Achaemenid Empire. The columns used there were heavily influenced by the Greeks, who were famous for using columns to support their post and beam construction, but they also incorporated their own style elements. For example, Persian columns have what is known as a Persian animal capital, which refers to the use of animal sculptures as the capital (the top part of a column.) The images below show a classic example of a Persian animal capital column.

Animals show up frequently in ancient Persian architecture, with one of the most notable uses being to “guard” palaces and other important buildings. This was a practice developed originally by the Egyptians, but since the Egyptians were frequently conquered by other empires in the region, this style spread quickly, and nearly all of the important buildings in the key

Persian cities of Persepolis and Pasargadae have beautifully sculpted animals standing guard at their entrances.

As time progressed, the Persians began to adapt other styles, most notably that of the Romans. Instead of using post and beam construction techniques, the Romans favored arch-supported buildings, something that would go on to also heavily influence the building styles of most European cultures. The most famous example of this is the Sassanian palace at Ctesiphon, which makes use of engaged columns and blind arches, which are built into the structure instead of outside it, to form a uniquely Persian-Roman style of building. The picture below helps give an idea as to what this style is.

Persian architecture would begin to undergo a transformation after the Muslim invasion. This is why Persian art is usually divided into two periods: pre- and post-Islamic. Post-Islamic Persian architecture incorporated many of the style elements most notable to Islamic art, such as colorful mosaics, large, repeating patterns, calligraphy, stucco, and mirror work. Much of this architecture is on display in the mosques found throughout Iran, as this would have been one of the primary projects of Persian architects, builders, and artisans throughout the Islamic period.

Furthermore, the Persians adapted the Islamic flare for grandeur, choosing to construct large palaces, mosques, parks, and city squares, which would all become defining characteristics of Persian buildings during the Islamic

period. Perhaps the best example of this is Naqsh-e Jahan Square, which was built in the 16th century during the time of the Persian Safavid Dynasty. Located in the modern-day city of Isfaha, it's considered to be the sixth-largest city square in the world, and it's a defining piece of post-Islamic Persian architecture. The picture below shows some of the stylistic components of the square's architecture, and it also gives an idea as to just how large this part of the city was.

However, as we should expect, this exchange of artistic styles and techniques was not a one-way street. The Persians themselves, with their rich, vibrant history and culture, managed to make an impact on Islamic architecture, and this is evident throughout the world. Specifically, the Persians were responsible for the inclusion of large-scale domes into Islamic architecture.

This practice was most likely first developed by the Persians under the Sassanian Dynasty, with the most famous buildings being the Palace of Ardashirt and Dezh Dohtar. These domes were relatively new in western Asia and the Near East, but they quickly became a central aspect of nearly all Islamic buildings.

It is for reasons like this why Persia is considered to be one of the driving forces behind the Islamic art culture that dramatically influenced the way the world designed and built buildings. Buildings incorporating these stylistic elements can be found in regions of the world ranging as far as India to Spain. Of course, it would be inaccurate to say Persia was solely responsible for this development, but it would also be inaccurate to say Persian artists and architects did not heavily influence much of the building

that took place across western Asia before, during, and after the Islamic Golden Age.

***Sculpture and Painting***

Persian styles of art and architecture are evident in their buildings, but beyond that, there are many other examples of how Persian art was influenced by and also influenced the artistic development of cultures in the region.

Ancient Persian sculptures came in two forms. The first was sculpted reliefs, which were usually found in temples or palaces. These works are great examples of how Persian art was a true mix between East and West. For example, the Europeans, mostly through the Greeks and Romans, were known for highly-realistic sculptures. They seemed to be most interested in depicting the natural world as accurately and precisely as possible. On the other hand, ancient Mesopotamian cultures favored far more stylized designs, ones that played up the supernatural or even surreal elements of reality.

However, what we see in Persian reliefs is a true mix between these two approaches. For example, consider the relief depicted below. Close attention to detail has been given to the two animals, with the sculptors clearly concerned with trying to be precise in terms of proportions and size. However, the face of the second animal is highly stylized, which helps to show the Persian interest in some of the techniques commonly used in western Asia at the time.

The other significant component of Persian sculpture was its metalwork. The Persians were known for creating quite beautiful statuettes, rhytons (small vessels that can be used as a goblet or a pitcher), and jewelry. Again, these pieces represented a nice mix between Eastern and Western style, which would have made them rather unique and therefore highly desired by citizens across the empire.

These items represent one of the few opportunities for common citizens to enjoy the art created as a result of imperial splendor. Few if any commoners could have afforded sculptures or reliefs in their home, and so owning one of these small, yet finely-crafted trinkets would have been a great source of pride and a family's or individual's chance to express their wealth. As a result, these pieces would have made up a bulk of the luxury trade items the Persians sent to other parts of the empire, making them an important source of wealth for Persian merchants.

***Painting***

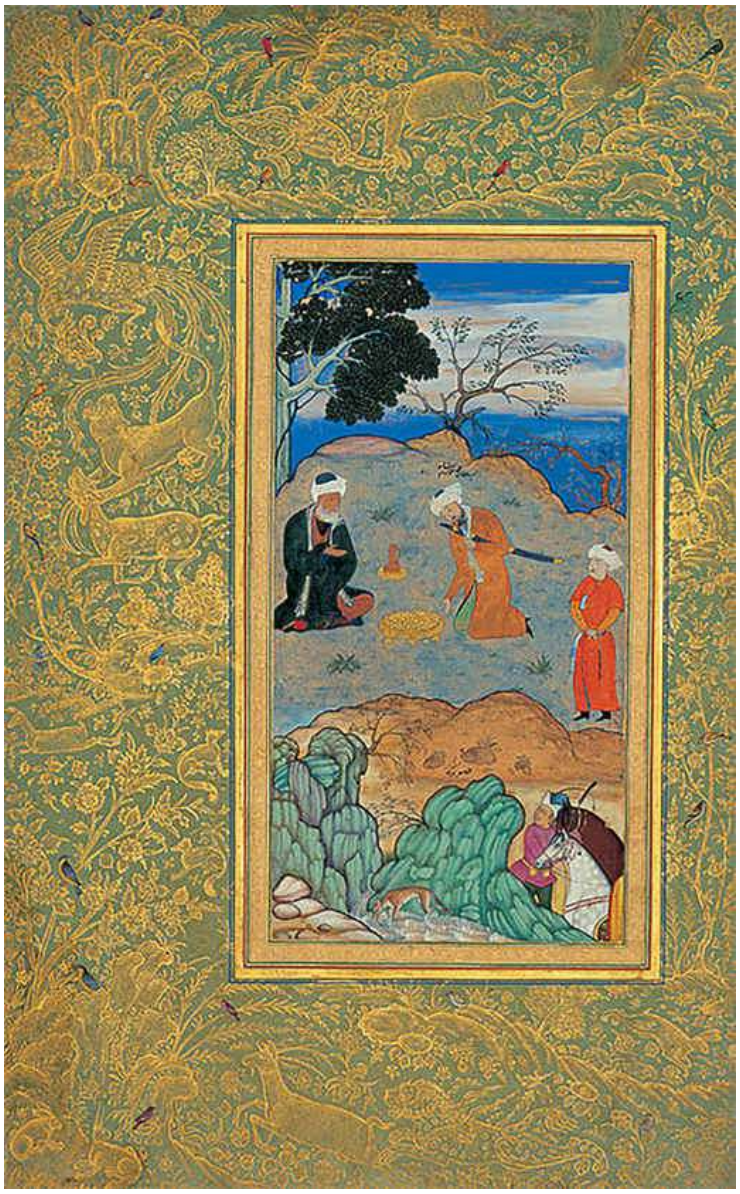
Painting in the Persian Empire did not become common until around the time of the Muslim conquest. Few wall paintings remain from the pre-Islamic period, so it's difficult to tell if this was just not a common practice or if time has simply caused these works to disappear. However, after Muslim conquest and during the time of the post-Islamic dynasties, Persian

painting developed significantly and contributed to the overall development of Islamic art.

Perhaps the best-known examples of this are the Persian miniatures. These small paintings were used to accompany storytelling, usually used to depict narrative scenes in the many different books developed in post-Islamic Persia.

Two main stylistic elements stand out from Persian miniatures. The first is that Persian art never fully forbade depiction of the human form, something that was common in many Muslim-controlled territories. This helps demonstrate the relative autonomy Persia was able to maintain during the period of foreign rule from the 8th century CE to the 16th. And while the accuracy of these painters was still not quite up to the same standard as what we would see from the Old Masters that appeared in Europe during the Renaissance, these paintings help to show what people may have looked like, how they dressed, and also how they lived.

The other major contribution that came about from the painting of these miniatures was the concept of "Illumination." This describes the practice of surrounding paintings or even texts with highly-decorative, highly-ornamental designs. The purpose was to try and showcase more beautifully the work of art being presented. Some of the best examples of this are in the copies of the Qur'an that came out of Persia during this time. Because these designs were so successful in beautifying certain texts, many artists began to focus their efforts entirely on these decorative patterns, which helped contribute to perhaps one of Persian's most famous contributions to world art: Persian carpets. The image below depicts a Persian miniature surrounded by a highly-decorative border.



***Carpets and Rugs***

No discussion of Persian art would be complete without mention of carpets and rugs. The interesting thing about carpet production in Persia, though, is that it was first and foremost a trade. In the ancient world, art was usually something relegated to those who could afford luxury. It was produced by those who were fortunate enough to receive training in the arts, and it was created for those with the wealth, power, and status needed to afford art in the home.

However, in Persia, much like in the rest of the "Rug Belt" (the term used to describe the countries most known for carpet production in the Middle East, ranging from Persia to India), carpet weaving was developed as a means of

subsistence by various nomadic tribes; carpets would be designed, created, and brought to market to be sold. Because of this tradition, it is difficult to pin down any one particular style to describe Persian carpets, but they are in part defined by their exceptional elaborateness and intricate designs, which has helped make them one of the world's most desired commodities.

For example, some designs reflected the nomadic lifestyle of those who made them, telling stories of herding animals and of living on the plains of central Asia, whereas others are clearly designed with an eye for pure aesthetics, using repeated patterns and other intricate design elements most commonly seen in post-Islamic Persia.

Persian carpet weaving likely turned into more of an industry under the Safavids, who built what can be best described as factories in the city of Isfahan (these were more centers of production than full-on, mechanized factories, but the principle is the same). Here the Safavid kings dedicated significant resources to the designs and production of Persian carpets, helping them to become one of the staples of Persian luxury trades. These carpets became so famous that they were desired by the wealthy and powerful from around the world, and many Persian carpets are now on display in museums around the world. Below is a picture of the Ardabil Carpet, housed part of the time in London and part of the time in Los Angeles, and also the Coronation Carpet, which was purchased by the Danish royal family in the 17$^{th}$ century and is kept in Copenhagen.

Persian carpet making has been inscribed by UNESCO into their "Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists." Their production represents an important aspect of both the artistic and economic development of the region throughout history. It would have stimulated trade within the empire, and it would have also helped Persia connect with more powerful civilizations in both Europe and Asia. Furthermore, carpet design both benefited from and contributed to the intricate designs used in many other forms of Persian and Islamic art, helping the region develop what would become one of its defining artistic styles.

***Conclusion***

As we might expect, Persian art is very much a reflection of its history. Persia's emergence onto the stage thousands of years after the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Sumerians had all settled the Fertile Crescent meant that early Persian art heavily reflected the styles of these previous cultures. However, as Persia became more powerful, it began to assert its own influence on the region's art. Eventually, by the time of the Muslim conquest of Persia, it had developed a strong enough artistic culture to not

only survive this period of dramatic transformation, but to also influence it in a way that would make Persia an important part of the overall development of Middle Eastern culture.

# Chapter 10 – Persian Contributions to Science and Technology

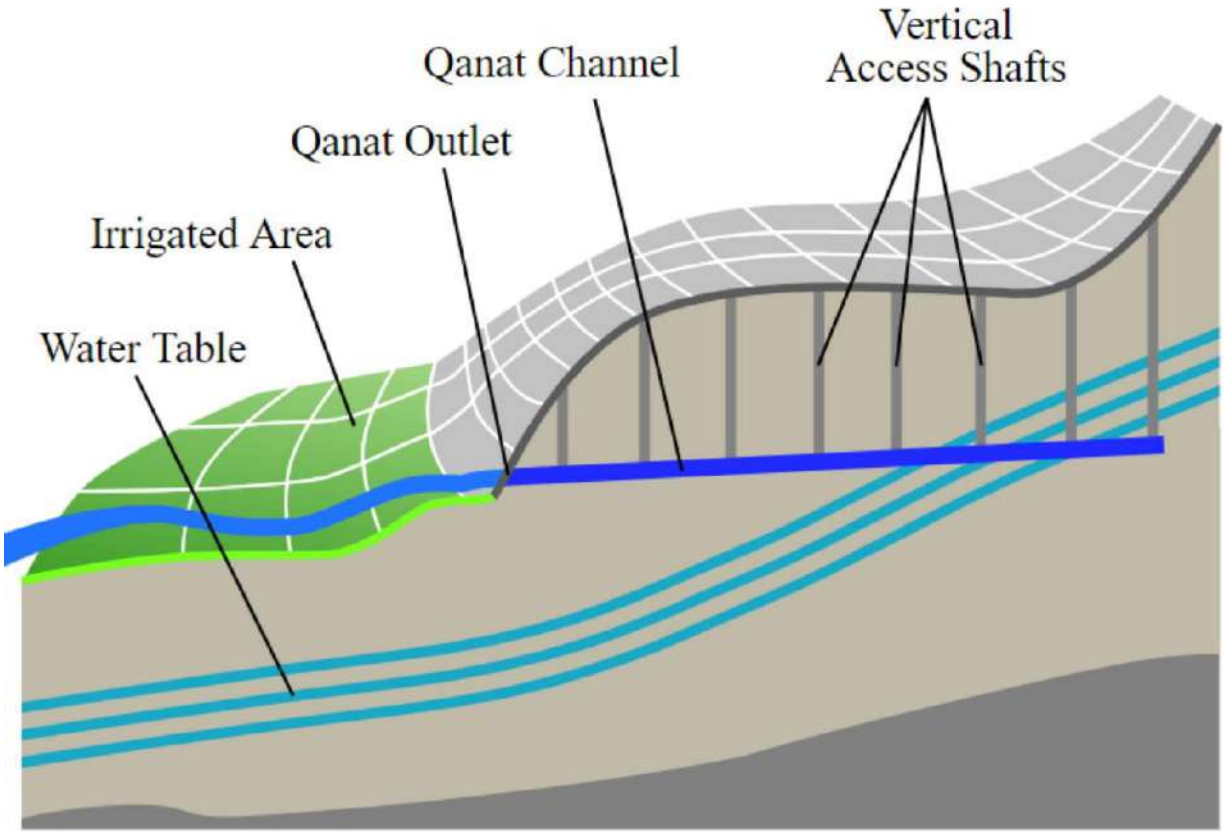
A civilization's ability to produce scientific and technological advancements has a direct impact on its success. The world's most powerful civilizations have all reached their positions as a result of using science to gain an advantage over their adversaries.

Persia is no different. Although their distant neighbors and long-time rivals, the Greeks, with famous names such as Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Archimedes, are responsible for many of the most significant scientific developments of the ancient world, the Persians themselves made many contributions that helped bring human civilization forward and established them as the main power in western Asia.

***Ancient Persia***

One of the most significant advancements to come out of ancient Persia was the *qanat*. Although there remains some debate as to whether or not the *qanat* was entirely the invention of the Persians—similar structures appear throughout Mesopotamia and Arabia around the same time—evidence suggests the Persians were able to advance this technology and use it to help them grow into a powerful force. There are more *qanats* in Persia than in any other part of the world

A *qanat* is essentially a system of irrigation. It involves the building of a gently sloping canal through a mountain that taps into the underground water table and provides a steady stream of water for both drinking and irrigation. In many ways, a *qanat* is an underground aqueduct, although constructing this canal underground would have presented the Persians with considerable challenges; the construction of so many of these structures suggests the Persians were significantly advanced at the time. Today, the Qanats of Gonabad are still in use. They are some of the oldest in the world, and they provide water to some 40,000 people living in modern-day Iran. Below is a diagram of how a *qanat* is constructed and how it provides water to the land and people.




The other major technological development to come out of ancient Persia was the windmill. The Babylonians had developed a windwheel and used it as a pump for irrigation staring in the 18th century BCE, but shortly after the Persians settled the Iranian plateau, they began using a windmill, which served the same purpose as the Babylonian windwheel but is more effective.

The ancient Persians are also responsible for creating the world's first battery, a device known as the Baghdad Battery. It consisted of a terracotta pot, which was filled with sand, and a large iron rod that was enclosed in a copper tube, which would have been able to conduct electricity. However, a lack of sources describing this device and its heavily corroded state upon discovery have made it hard for historians to determine with any accuracy what exactly this device would have been used for. Some theories suggest it was used as a galvanic cell, or as a tool for electroplating, or a method of electrotherapy. Nonetheless, the Baghdad Battery dates to the time near the end of the Parthian and beginning of the Sassanian dynasties, suggesting the Persians at the time were leaders in science and technology.

***Islamic and Post-Islamic Persia***

After the Muslim conquest of Persia, the ancient power continued to contribute to the development of modern science. One of the more notable contributions was the 11th-century philosopher, Biruni, wrote in an astronomical text that the earth might rotate around the sun. At the time, cultures around the world believed in a geocentric universe, meaning the Earth was at its center. And although Biruni had no material evidence to support this claim, we can look back on his statement and attribute it to the great scientific culture that existed in Persia at the time.

The Law of the Conservation of Mass, which was proved by Lomonosov and Laurent Lavoisier in the 18th century and states that a body of matter never disappears but rather just changes from one form to another, also has its origins in Persia, with the philosopher Tusi first writing this idea down. Tusi also wrote down some of the world's first inquiries into the concept of evolution, but he was doing so in an attempt to make a religious argument, and therefore cannot be given too much credit for this discovery.

Another important scientist of the Islamic period, Jaber Ibn Hayyan, is considered to be one of the founding fathers of modern chemistry. He published an encyclopedia that outlined his thoughts on subjects such as the applications of tanning and textiles, the distillation of plants and flowers, the origin of perfumes, and how gunpowder could be used . Perhaps this last topic was what had such a lasting influence on world history, for the East discovered and made use of gunpowder long before the West, and its discovery led to the formation of the Gunpowder Empires, which used this technology to establish firm control over territory in western and central Asia.

Kamal al-Din Al-Farisi was another famous scientist to come out of the Islamic period. He focused more on trying to describe the physical world, and he is credited with coming up with the first legitimate explanation for why a rainbow occurs. However, perhaps more importantly, he made this claim by first presenting a theory and then running rigorous experiments to verify it, suggesting he may have helped usher in the use of the scientific method and rationalism into Iran, which would become driving forces of scientific development throughout the medieval period and beyond.

The other area where the Persians helped make significant advancements in science was in medicine. It's believed the Achaemenid Persians invented

the concept of organ transplants, although little evidence exists to suggest they were able to do these procedures reliably and successfully.

One of the most popular things to look at in the development of Persian medicine is the way in which they diagnosed and then treated headaches. For much of history, this common ailment was not understood, yet Persian doctors set out to try and figure out what caused these headaches and how they could be cured. They made detailed observations of the different types of headaches, classifying them by the symptoms they produced and their potential causes.

This culture of observation and experimentation helped Persia develop into a center for medicine in the medieval world, a culture that has continued until the present day. The founding of the Academy of Gundishapur under the Sassanian Dynasty in the 6th century CE represents the world's first teaching hospital. People from all over the world, from Greece to India, would come to Gundishapur to study and practice, taking what they learned back with them to their home. This academy is still around today and is considered one of the world's premier medical schools.

In the field of mathematics, the Persians made many accomplishments, especially while under Islamic rule, which dedicated significant resources to the development of mathematics. Perhaps one of the most significant things to come out of Persian math, though, was the 10th century CE invention of the logarithm table by Muhammad Ibn Musa-al-Kharazmi. He also made significant contributions to the development of algebra, and he also expanded upon both Persian and Indian arithmetic. Because of all of his work, al-Kharazmi is considered to be one of the fathers of modern mathematics.

***Conclusion***

The Persians established themselves as a distinct cultural and linguistic group over 2,000 years ago. And given their success at establishing and holding an empire throughout that time, it should come as no surprise that the Persians were able to make significant contributions to the development of world culture. However, their achievements in science and technology are among some of the most important. Today, the modern-day nation of Iran continues to be a high achiever in the world of science. Important international conferences are held each year throughout the country, and

Iran continues to be a leader in modern medicine, helping to continue the legacy and splendor of the Persian Empire into the modern era.

# Conclusion

As the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the Middle East has played a critical role in the development of the world we live in today. The many different imperial powers that emerged from this region—known by many as the Cradle of Civilization—helped to draw the borders of some of the world's most powerful and populous countries. And at the center of all of this was Persia.

Unlike the Assyrians or the Babylonians, once the Persians entered the scene in western Asia in the 7th century BCE, they became central components to the region's social, political, and cultural development. Not only did the Persian Empire lay the groundwork for a common Persian culture and identity, but it helped establish the borders of the modern-day nation of Iran, helped spread Islam throughout the Middle East, and taught the world how to effectively and efficiently administer a vast empire.

The first Persian Empire—the Achaemenid Empire—controlled all of western Asia as well as parts of Africa and even Europe. And while subsequent dynasties would be unable to match the territorial achievements of the Achaemenids, they would help to establish the Iranian people and their country as an economic power that would be critical in helping to establish East-West trade and diplomatic relations.

Today, Persia, or Iran, is in a time of political uncertainty. The Iranian Revolution of 1977 brought democracy to the country, building off the constitutional reforms that were carried out at the beginning of the 20th century, but this did not bring stability. Its Supreme Leader has become rather powerful, and in the face of international antagonism, it has fallen slightly out of favor on the world stage.

However, the history of Persia shows us one thing: this culturally-distinct, proud, and advanced society is here to stay. Time and time again, defeat or instability has threatened Persia, but it always found a way to reassert itself as a dominant force in the region, and there is every reason to believe this will continue to be the case, especially when considering Iran holds the largest reserves of natural gas, the fossil fuel that is quickly becoming the world's favorite.

Overall, there's no telling what the Persia of tomorrow will look like, but if its past is any indication, then it's safe to assume it will be an important

country capable of shaping not only the course of Middle Eastern history but of the entire world.

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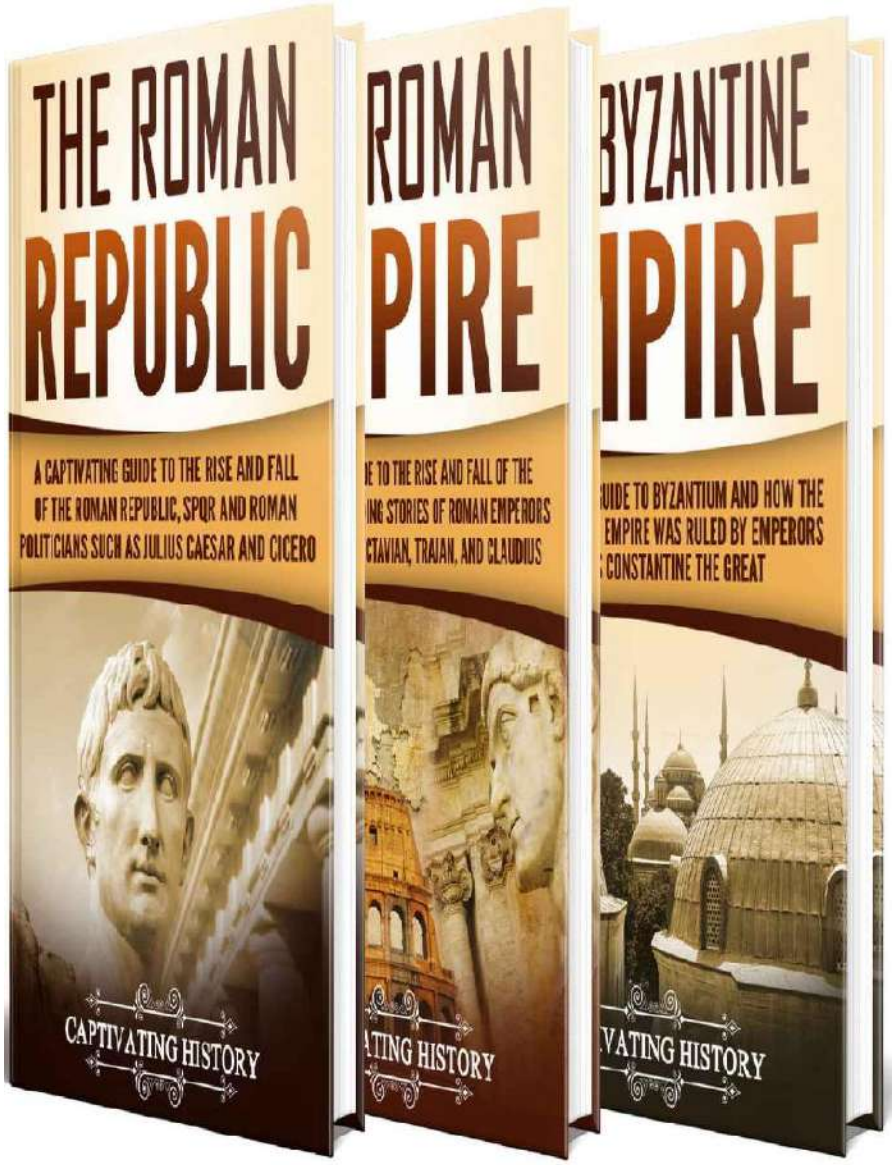


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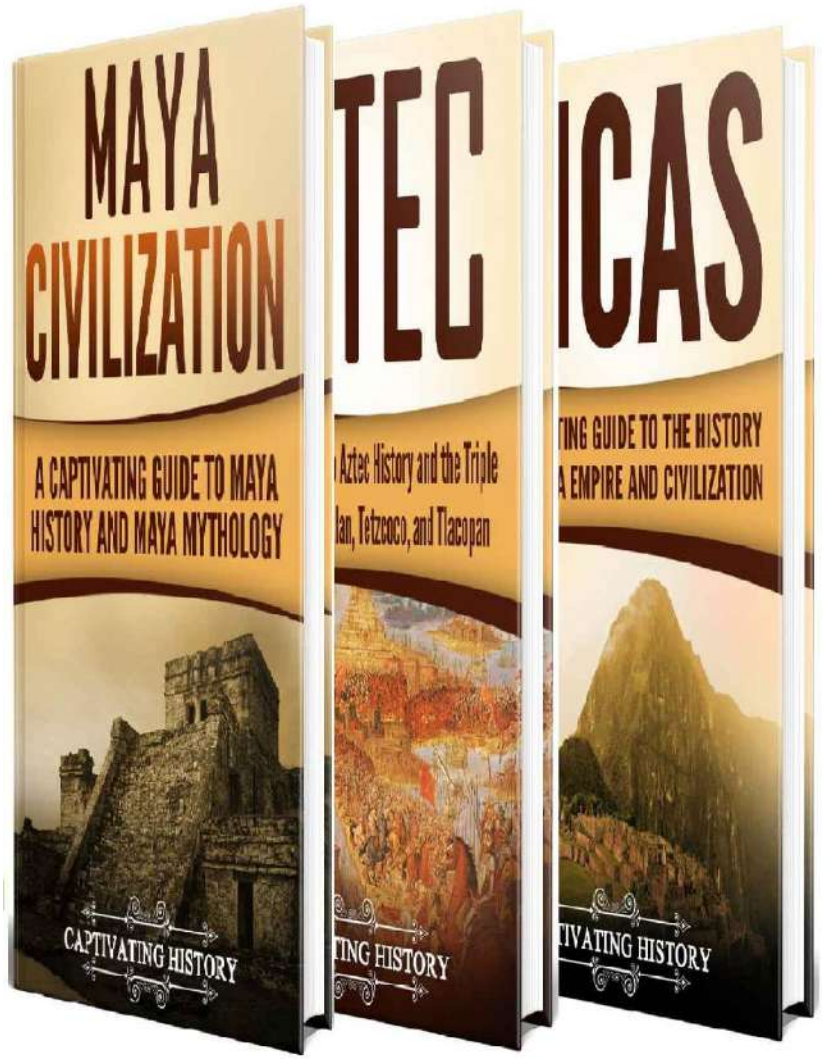


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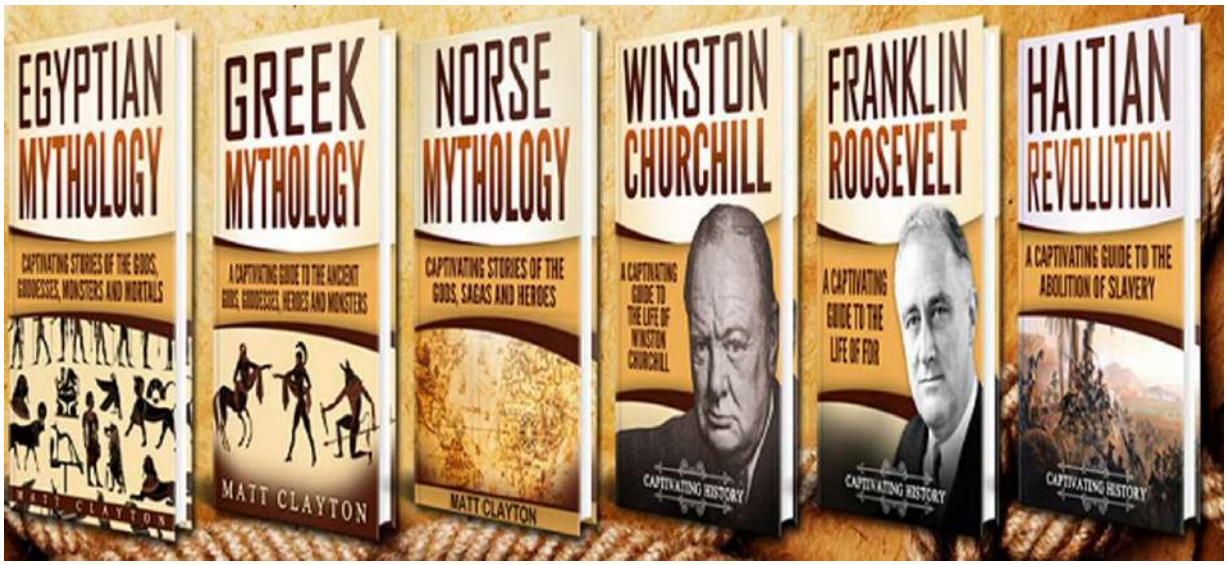
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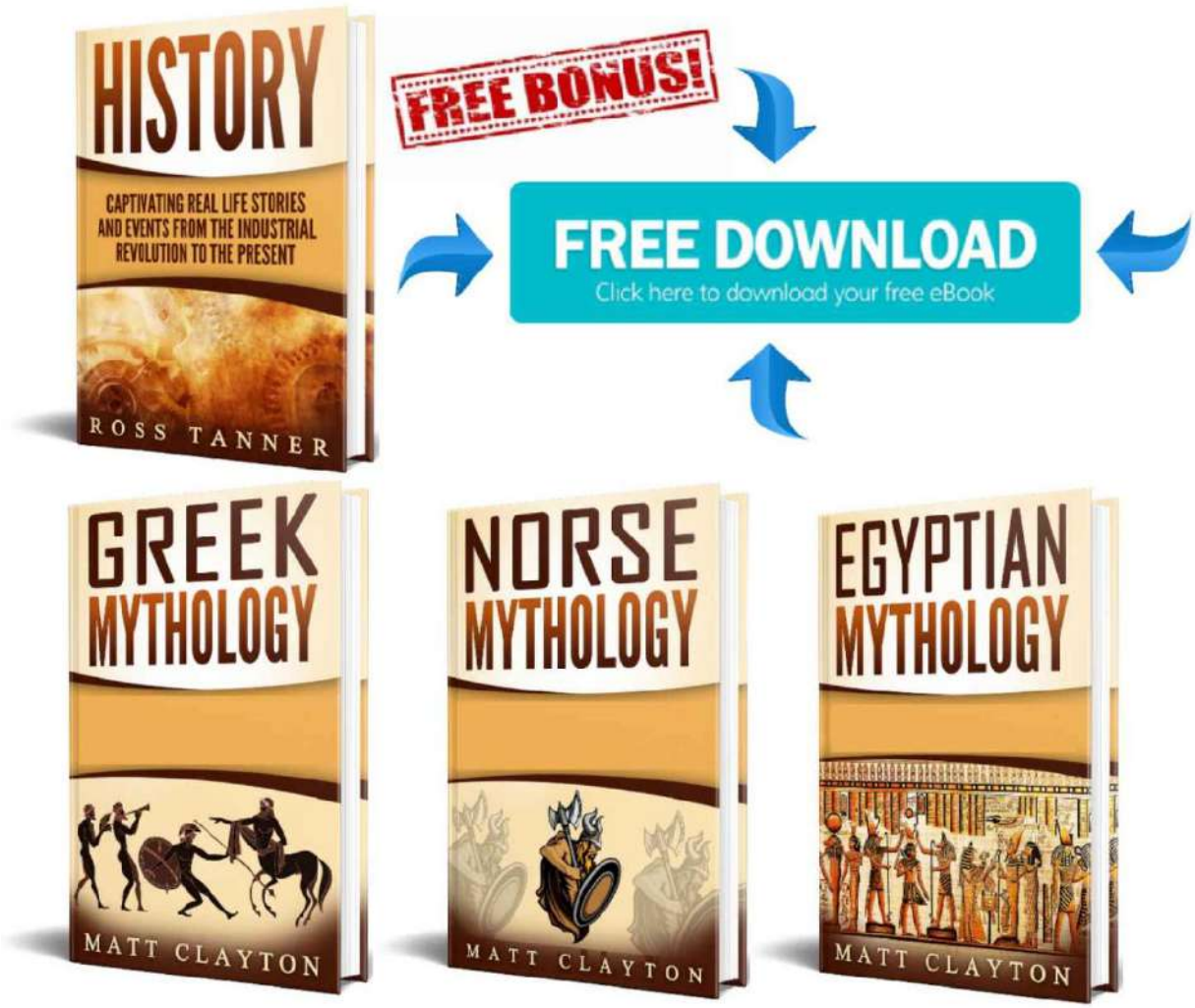


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